

Talk 1

Boys and Girls,

Thank you so much for all these presents – I know for sure that they will help some other boys and girls, mums and dads, to have a far better Christmas.

I wonder if there are any cuddly toys among all those presents – I would nearly think that there are – cuddly lambs and dogs etc, maybe lovely soft teddy bears and lovely lions.

Do you like those sort of things? What is it about them that makes so many people love cuddly toys? Have you a favourite one?

(1) Here are some more cuddly animals coming up on the screens. Let's have a look.

- Lions, Bears, Wolves, Snakes

Wouldn't you love to have one of those beside you in bed?

Perhaps in real life, some of them wouldn't be very cuddly at all – and they might not be very friendly if you bumped into them.

Would you like to snuggle up beside one of those?

Which one do you think would be the fiercest and the most frightening? Perhaps none of them seem all that friendly! If they weren't closed in, as in the Zoo, you would certainly need to be very, very careful with any of these animals.

But here's a very strange thing – Our Bible Reading, that Rhona read, from the book of Isaiah says that one day they will all be friendly friends:

- the fierce wolf will live with the gentle little lamb!
- the prowling leopard will lie down with the farm goat!
- the young calf and the great lion will be happy together!
- the quiet cow will eat with the dangerous bear!
- Babies and children will play safely with poisonous snakes like cobras and vipers!

It sounds very strange to me – so **Don't try this at home !!!**

I wonder what God meant when he put this in the Bible, by telling Isaiah, the man who wrote this book.

Well, I think it means that God wants his world to be a place where everybody is ‘friends’ – where not only the animals get on well with each other, but even more importantly, the People!

- where boys and girls help each other instead of falling out with each other.
- where big people don’t argue and fight so much with each other.
- where we’re not so selfish - always wanting more and more for ourselves, and not caring very much about anyone else – because that’s what leads to all the problems and all the arguments.

That’s the kind of world God wants it to be, and he tries to get us to understand this by giving Isaiah this ‘crazy’ dream of a world where the animals don’t fight with each other and never attack the people.

It is a bit of a dream, isn’t it – it’s very hard to imagine how it could ever be like that.

But God showed Isaiah that **one day it would be like that** because someone special was coming who would start to change things.

He would especially change the people and help them to be different – to think far less about themselves and what they want, to make them think far more about other people and what they need – And he would do it, most of all, by helping people to think a lot about God and trusting in him. And when that happens, says Isaiah, people won’t argue and fight so much with each other, but would be far better friends.

This must have been a very special person that God said was coming.

This person is Jesus – he does help us to be different. In fact he is the only person who can really help us to be different. We can’t do it ourselves, no matter how hard we try – but with Jesus, it

makes all the difference to the people we are, and the people we will be when we grow up.

He does help us to try very hard at being good friends with other people.

He encourages us not to fall out with each other and fight, even with people who make life hard for us.

He helps us to be less selfish and greedy.

He helps us to care more about other people and their needs.

One of the names that the Bible has for Jesus is *the Prince of Peace* - People who know and trust Jesus as their Friend and Master also want to work hard at being good friends to other people – even when it is hard.

At Christmas we are very glad because Jesus, the Prince of Peace came from God – it's a time for a great celebration.

But if we are really glad about Jesus, we have to be people who try very hard at being good friends with other people, and we have to become people who care.

Our gifts today are one very important way of showing that we care about some other boys and girls, and big people, who mightn't have a very good Christmas otherwise. It's great to help a little bit, even though we will probably never actually meet any of those people.

And, as we grow up, we need to ask Jesus to be our Helper, so that we can be people who trust in his love and show his friendship to others.

This is the way God wants life to be – remember that when your cuddly toys remind you of wolves and lions and bears lying down happily beside lambs and calves and children.

Talk 2

Boys and girls, doesn't that sound good? Maybe you already know some of the wonderful songs in '*Joseph and his amazing technicolour dreamcoat*'. It's a great show, with great music, about a man who had a great trust in God, even though he had some pretty hard times in his life. So this is something exciting to really look forward to next year.

Now back to this other man, Isaiah, who also had a great trust in God and who was very, very excited about what God was going to do one day – how God had promised him that there would be a day when the wolf would live with the lamb, and the calf with the lion, and life would be much better for everybody.

(2) Repeat some of the wild animal pictures

The young people and adults, especially, will understand that this dream of a wonderful new day when there would be new friendship and fairness in God's world was a very exciting message, especially when we remember that, at that time, things weren't very good at all. We've heard about some of the problems in earlier sermons from Isaiah.

a) Within their own country there wasn't much by way of friendship and fairness. The early chapters of Isaiah tell us about:

- a land of huge unfairness and of deep divisions;
- a land where people were very religious in one way, but it didn't show up in real life;
- where there was a huge gap between those who had power and wealth, and those who didn't;
- where there was a real lack of legal and financial fairness and a real absence of genuine caring friendship towards those at the bottom of life's pile.

Isaiah had been telling them that if their religion actually amounts to anything, they need to learn to do what's right and learn to care a lot more.

b) This was the situation within their own country, but that

wasn't the only problem. From outside their own country they could see the terrible threat of an invading army from Assyria, one of the great powers of the day - Isaiah had been warning them about the threat – he could see it coming – and, almost certainly with great sadness, he told them that God was going to use this frightening, aggressive neighbour to bring his people to their senses – *Assyria, the rod of God's anger* was how Isaiah put it.

So things weren't great – and when Isaiah talked about this day of help and hope, of friendship and fairness, that would eventually come, the people probably listened to him with a funny mixture of excitement and disbelief.

Some of them heard Hope in what he was saying about a new day of friendship and fairness.

Some of them maybe just said, '*Dream on, Isaiah, that'll be the day*'. Maybe there was a bit of both reactions in most of them.

But what about us? Are we also a wee bit inclined to tell Isaiah to '*Dream on*'?

But listen, our Christian conviction, built on all that Scripture tells us, is that this passage from Isaiah came true when Jesus Christ came – that this is a passage of prophecy about the coming of God's Messiah - and that, therefore, all that Isaiah had to say about surprising new friendships and transforming new fairness ought to be priorities for all the people who celebrate Christ's coming and trust in him as God's Messiah.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, and to think again about the coming of the Christ from God, we need to realise that it most certainly means a deep and challenging commitment to the issues of friendship and fairness, for these things, says Isaiah are key elements of what God intends for his world:

(3) Friendship and Fairness

Fairness – we need to care very seriously about the many issues of unfairness and inequality in God's world, *for righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness will be the sash around his waist.*

- **Friendship** – we need to be people who are committed to new harmony between old enemies, says Isaiah, *for the wolf will live with the lamb, for they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain ...*

Therefore it is very difficult to take any other point of view, than to say that those who are people of trust and hope in the one Isaiah said would come, the Messiah, Jesus, have to be people who are strenuously committed to the challenges of friendship and fairness – even if it may often, even always, be a very difficult matter in reality.

Could it be that this is a foundational passage for us as we struggle with how to think about some of the following things?

- the long history and the terrible things that explain the old enmities, north and south? Should we not be people who are committed to doing all we can to build new friendships – maybe they are coming, however slowly; maybe we must be people who give them strong encouragement. Maybe even in Ireland, *the wolf will live with the lamb ... And the lion eat straw with the ox.*

- Friendship and Fairness also requires us to think long and hard about the complex inequalities of our world, which we probably don't understand fully, but where we need to be committed to doing what can be done. The 'Fair Trade' logo on our newsheet these weeks is one way of making us think. And when you receive your Christmas magazine later this month it will include the annual Christmas World Development Appeal, which this year is called *Horizons of Hope* – a title that would have been very close to Isaiah's heart, for this chapter that we've been reading today is very much about *Horizons of Hope*.

So we cannot, should not, be able to read this wonderful, wonderful chapter where Isaiah speaks in prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, Christ – and where he says it will be a day that will bring new friendships and new fairness – we cannot, and should not read this chapter without being both encouraged and challenged to be Christian people who are committed to

friendship and fairness that goes far beyond what comes naturally to us, beyond what even sits comfortably with us, for *with righteousness and with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth ... and the wolf will lie down with the lamb ... and they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain ...*

Talk 3

(4) Boys and girls, here are some of those wonderful wild life pictures again.

Do you remember what we've been thinking about today?

Isaiah tells us that God wants a world where people are friends and people are fair.

How wonderful that would be – and yet how hard it is to make it like that.

Most of the time this is a world where lions are fierce, and wolves are very dangerous, and snakes have poisonous bites and it is not only the animal world, for in the world of people, boys and girls, and big people especially, are sometimes even worse in the things they do to each other.

But Isaiah wasn't stupid – he knew what the world was like, he knew what people are like – and it hasn't changed very much.

This very important prophet from the OT, called Isaiah, knew that people would only learn to be true friends, and people would only learn to live fairly, if God came to help them and change their ways.

That's just what God is going to do, said Isaiah, with great excitement. At just the right time, he is going to send someone very, very special:

(5) The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

And when God sends this very special person, things *will* begin to change; there *will* be new hope; until eventually *all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

Otherwise, things will never be any better, and there will be no hope.

When it is just us trying to be better, and trying to make God's world better, most of the time, it is like the problem a juggler has as he tries to keep all the balls up in the air. As he concentrates very hard on one of the balls, another one is looking like falling. It is nearly impossible to keep them all going well at the same time. We try hard to solve one human problem and another one is starting up, and we can't sort it out!

Hope only comes when God comes to sort things out.

And that is what Christmas is about. It is about God coming to bring hope to our lives and hope to our world. It is about God intervening to do what we cannot do. It is about God coming when Jesus came. Isn't he the one upon whom we see *the Spirit of the Lord will resting – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.*

Isn't it Jesus who is most perfectly described by this chapter in Isaiah?

This is where real help comes from and real hope begins.

But God does not come into this world to sort things out in one fell swoop! How awful that would be, for as Isaiah warns at the end of vs.4, *He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*

He will do so, at the final day – with all the people and all the situations where his love and his way is still ignored or rejected. But for now, he calls us to become his people, most truly and surely. And, he calls us, as his people, to begin his work of friendship and fairness.

Listen to these very powerful, personal words that we read from Isaiah 12:2

***(6) Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid.
The Lord is my song; he has become my salvation. With joy you
will draw water from the wells of salvation.***

This is the call of encouraging love and lasting hope that comes to us from God at Christmas.

This is the only way of encouragement and hope in a world that is so full of unfairness instead of fairness, and hatred instead of friendship.

This must be our starting point, if we are to have hope in our own lives, and if we are to bring friendship and fairness to other lives.

This Christmas, let us draw water with joy from the wells of God's salvation in Christ, and then let us be committed to being active agents of his friendship and fairness.

So today, our sermon from Isaiah is about:

(7) Friendship and Fairness and Faith in Christ.

(1) Here are some more cuddly animals coming up on the screens. Let's have a look.

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(2) Repeat some of the wild animal pictures

(3) Friendship and Fairness

(4) Boys and girls, here are some of those wonderful wild life pictures again.

(5) The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

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Boys and girls, I always look forward to this Sunday near Christmas, when you bring your parcels and presents for other people at Christmas.

It's a really good thing to do – and you always bring lots and lots of lovely gifts. Thank you very much indeed.

Every year we send your gifts to the Belfast City Mission and to the North Down & Ards Women's Aid. They know just the right people to give the gifts to – people who maybe won't receive many other gifts and who mightn't be able to have a very good Christmas – boys & girls, and big people whose lives are often pretty hard all the year round.

So we hope, and we know that your gifts will make a big difference. Thank you so much indeed – both to you, and to your Mums and Dads.

Please bring them up to the tree and then stay at the front for our first talk this morning.

Prayer