

Sunday 7th November 2021 – Joseph (4) ‘The Faithful’ (Genesis 41:1-40)

‘For more than seventy years, I have been lucky to meet and to know many of the world’s great leaders. And I have perhaps come to understand a little about what made them special. It has sometimes been observed that what leaders do for their people today is government and politics. But what they do for the people of tomorrow — that is statesmanship.’

These powerful words of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II began the COP26 climate conference at the beginning of this week – and it struck me how relevant they were for our service today. We’ve come to that moment in the story when Joseph’s fortunes finally turn around, and he becomes the right person in the right place at the right time. And what triggers this turnaround is **a similar conundrum to the one we face right now**. Egypt under Pharaoh is currently enjoying a prosperous present – but a fragile and dangerous future is just around the corner. Will the leaders of that nation take the necessary steps to save their future?

What causes this pivotal moment is rather different, though – it is a pair of dreams. As you know, dreams run throughout the story of Joseph: they were what got him into trouble with his family, and what got the cupbearer out of trouble in prison. But now attention switches right to the very top – the ruler of Egypt has dreams, ones which no-one else can interpret. **Pharaoh needs someone with wisdom, discernment and integrity – where is he going to find such a person?**

At long last, the cupbearer makes good on the promise he forgot to honour two years previously: he reminds Pharaoh about Joseph and so Joseph is rapidly called to the throne room – but not before he’d had a shave and a change of clothes – it wouldn’t do for Pharaoh to see the real conditions the prisoners were being kept in!

And most of us are familiar with the story – Joseph understands that God is speaking to Pharaoh and is not afraid to tell him so. He also understands that Pharaoh is prophetically witnessing two visions of the same set of future events – seven years of good harvests followed by seven years of drought and failed harvests. The hot east wind would blow from the deserts of the Arabian peninsula, meaning the rains would fail and so would the harvest.

Joseph even gives Pharaoh a plan for how to weather the coming storm: save food during the good years, so that there might be reserves to tide the nation over when the bad years come. Unwittingly, in sharing this plan Joseph also saves his own family, who eventually travel across the Sinai desert from Israel to Egypt when their harvests fail too.

There’s so much gold to mine from this story. **First we have to acknowledge the hand of God in all of this. Humans are not the only actors in this story** – throughout we’ve seen that God is in control. Could it even be that God foreknew the disaster which threatened the world, and found perhaps the *only* way to get the one person who could save the situation into Egypt for just such a time as this? Perhaps events happened more chaotically than that – but the fact that God gave Joseph his dreams all those years ago suggests that God always intended a great destiny for Joseph, a destiny which not even the machinations of weak fathers, jealous brothers, scorned lovers and neglectful friends could thwart. God’s plan for Joseph’s life came to pass – God was faithful, even when life turned bad.

Second, it's not only God who is faithful in the story. Joseph's faithfulness to his Lord now receives its just reward. He has suffered more than a decade of setbacks, but his character had been formed and refined in the fire. The arrogance of youth had been replaced by a mature wisdom and integrity, which, allied to his obvious leadership skills, is now a powerful blessing, not just to Joseph himself and those around him, but to the whole world. Our calling may not be as great as Joseph's – but those same qualities are as prized now for all followers of Jesus as they were 4,000 years ago.

There is a particular dimension to this observation, though. Wisdom, courage and integrity matter to everyone – but they are particularly important in leadership. The world needed Joseph's qualities way back then: but we also need these qualities in our leaders now. Leadership is ultimately not about political skill but about character. How we need to recover that insight today, the very observation that one of the world's greatest living leaders – our Queen – made at the COP26 summit a few days ago.

The big difference between Egypt 4,000 years ago and today is that Pharaoh had to take bold steps of faith based on a couple of dreams. Imagine the howls of opposition he would have faced from his people when forcing them to store food when all seemed well, after 4 or 5 years of good harvests on the trot. We don't have to rely on dreams: we know what is coming if we don't act on the climate.

This week I saw a news report on the famine in Madagascar. Madagascar is a country with rich natural resources, and usually a favourable climate. It is not affected by war or by a particularly corrupt government. It is stable and not overpopulated. And yet up to a million people are facing starvation. Why? Because, like Egypt 4,000 years ago, there has been a prolonged drought and the crops have failed. Only this time, this drought has been caused almost entirely by climate change. Not the government, not poor husbandry, not war – but by the effect of our actions on the world's climate.

And this will be just the first of many such crises unless we make radical changes. We have seven more years of plenty to make the changes we need to avert the years which follow. The consensus is that 2030 is the tipping point if we go on at the rate we are now: we have the years 2022-2029 – seven years – to plan for the future. As Queen Elizabeth said: 'what we do for the people of tomorrow: that is statesmanship.'

So the big conference in Glasgow needs to be more than hot air – pardon the pun, hot air is exactly the problem we have. It is our chance to plan for the future. We already have modern-day Josephs with the right plans – what we really need now, dare I say it, are modern day Pharaohs with the will and the authority to make those plans happen.

Joseph's faithfulness saved a nation – in fact not just one nation but several. Will there be Josephs and Pharaohs today willing to save our planet? Whatever we do this week, let's pray for God to raise up leaders willing to work together, to make sacrifices, to take the necessary steps for the sake of our future.

And let's also recommit ourselves to be willing to make those sacrifices too, because our leaders will need us to be the change we want to see. May we, too, be faithful to our Lord, as Joseph was faithful, living with courage and integrity for the sake of others, and for the glory of God. Amen.