

Warning of climate change: A Bible story

Eco Theology reflection by Silvia Purdie, May 2023

Genesis 41 & 42: Pharaoh dreams

We love the promises of God. The promises of God in scripture are strong. We hang on to them. They sustain us and feed the soul. Which Bible promises are foundational for you? We do love the promises ... and God does promise us so many good things: I will never leave you. I will send the Spirit.

But the Bible also contains a good number of warnings as well as promises. Let's look at one of the most clear warnings in the Bible, which turned out all for God's purposes in the end. In Genesis 41 Joseph is languishing in prison. Years have gone by, and the promises God had made to him seemed downright cruel. Until Pharaoh has a dream. Long story short: Pharaoh has 2 vivid dreams one night. 7 fat cows are devoured by 7 scrawny cows. And then 7 nice plump ears of wheat are swalled by 7 shriveled up ears of grain.

Thankfully for Joseph, Pharaoh's cupbearer remembers a young chap in prison who is good with dreams, and Joseph is called. He alone understands the meaning of the dreams. They are a clear warning: famine is coming. 7 good years then – wham – climate change! Drought, leading to crop failure, leading to hunger, on a vast scale. Thankfully for several nations of people, Pharaoh recognised good advice when heard it, and spotted the talent. Joseph got the job and the rest is history.

I would like to draw what seem to me to be rather four obvious parallels with our current moment in history.

1: Those in power are warned of impending crisis.

Scientists have been warning of climate change for 3 decades now. The sceptics, like Pharaoh's official advisors, have been proved wrong and useless in the face of mounting evidence. In a moment I am going to ask you what warnings you have heard that seem most important to you at this time.

2: The correct response to warnings of disaster is decisive action.

As I often hear about climate change, the best time to act was years ago, but today is an OK 2nd best. We are running out of time. The years of famine are coming closer. Pharaoh delegated his authority to ensure long-term food supply for his people. For the Egyptians the key issue was food storage. I suspect for us the key issue is food production. Climate change will threaten many of the food producing areas of the world. If you think last year's food price rises were bad, just you wait. I think it is inevitable that much of the diversity of food we currently get from around the world will become significantly more expensive, including basics like rice. To care for our own communities we need to be growing more food. I have been inspired by what The Tribe has been doing in this space. Teaching skills, preserving fruit, using the land that God has given you.

3: The warning of famine comes with other impacts that we also will experience.

We turn the page into Genesis 42 and we find ourselves in a family, just one family out of hundreds of thousands, who are about to be torn apart and torn from their homeland. Jacob and Benjamin stay behind while the other brothers go in search of food. In our world

today the number of people displaced from their homes is rising. The UN Refugee Agency estimates 100 million, half of whom have left their home country. Climate crisis will push this number higher. How will we respond here in the highly desirable little nation safely tucked at the farthest reaches of the ocean? Will we welcome more refugees? Can we support aid agencies working with the displaced? As the scale of desperate human need increases, at the same time as we struggle to afford the basics – what is God’s call on the church and on the community in Aotearoa? There are no easy answers I’m afraid. But be warned.

4: The conviction of God’s promise.

Despite the massive threats that Egypt faced back then, and the whole world faces now, God is still at work. Despite the traumatic journey, God brought Joseph to the right place at the right time, with the skills he needed to make a significant difference. And ultimately God worked his purpose out. The story comes to a gut-wrenching climax in Genesis 45 with buckets of tears and the profound insight that God has been working his purpose out (verse 7): “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”

As we look in the face of climate change, we are warned. There is disaster coming. There will be sea level rise. There will be massive storms and floods. There will be heat and drought, famine and social disruption. And here we are, trying to be people of faith and hope and courage right here. We are Joseph people, trying to be in the right place at the right time and working in the power and light of the Holy Spirit so that we too might stand and say, “God sent me.” God is working his purposes out, even through us, in each and every place.

Questions to consider:

1. What warnings do you hear about our changing climate? What worries you in particular?
2. What might God be doing about it? How is Christ calling and equipping his church to respond?
3. What does this look like in your church?