

I wanted to start by saying that on this Harvest Sunday we are continuing with the story of Joseph and his time in Egypt. However, as some may have noticed, we are not so much continuing as slightly repeating. For last month in those balmy summer days of August we looked at Genesis 40 & 41. We saw in those chapters that God is the speaking God, the sovereign God, the saving God and we saw Joseph as the servant of God. I had intended to move on today to the end of the story however as I reflected upon these verses in Chap 41 I felt God had something more to say to us through them that relate to harvest and to our world today.

So let's go back to Gen 41:15 and firstly look at

Pharaoh's dream

Follow it with me in the text if you would. V17 Pharaoh was standing by the Nile, which was very much tied up with the fertility of Egypt. Out of that Nile came seven fat sleek cows, who started grazing. But then they were followed by seven more cows, who were scrawny, ugly and thin. These second lot of cows appeared to eat up the first lot of cows without them seeming to get any fatter. So at the end v21 those thin cows seemed just as bad as they started.

Then v22 Pharaoh had a second dream. In it, on one stalk of corn, there were seven ears of which were full and good. But then appeared seven other ears which were described by Pharaoh as withered thin and scorched. These thin ears swallowed up the fat ones.

That was the dream and no one seemed to be able to explain it to Pharaoh.

Joseph, by the enabling of God, could explain in and he explained it in terms of God. So v25, "God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do." Again we see the sovereign power of God. The God of Israel was at work in this land of Egypt.

As Joseph explained, v26 the dreams were saying the same thing, which is summed up in vs 29& 30, "Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land."

The dream was a warning from God that he was about to bring some changes to Egypt, there would be some good years yes, but there would be some bad years.

As we see later in v54 it wasn't just Egypt that suffered the problem for "there was famine in all the other lands". This meant that v57 "All the countries came to Egypt to buy grain" and that led Joseph's brothers to Egypt and eventually the reunion of the family.

God spoke to Pharaoh through this dream and as we see in v32 what God had said would come about, "The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon." So the dream required secondly

The necessary action

To do nothing was not an option. That is the situation it appears in the USA at the moment with the issue of whether the government pumps \$700 billion into the banking system to keep it going. Doing nothing is not an option and it wasn't then either.

So Joseph didn't just explain the dream he gave Pharaoh a course of action. It began v33 with someone being given Pharaoh's authority to act. The action v34 was to cream off 20% of each harvest during the seven good years and store that up so that when the seven bad years came there would be food and v36, "the country may not be ruined by the famine."

There was the action needed in a nut shell. As we know, I hope, Joseph was appointed to that task, God's servant under the hand of the sovereign God to bring salvation, especially to the people of God.

I hope that as I speak of plenty and famine and in the light of what we have seen of the situation in Burkina Faso we can see where this fits into harvest and into that specific situation. That country as part of the Sahel region of Africa which suffered a great drought in 2005 continues to struggle with drought and so poor harvests. With the appeal through Tear Fund and its mission partner Credo you can begin to see how this relates to harvest and to us in the west who, materially at least, have so much. So that our plenty is used to help in their famine.

I think what we begin to see here and can see elsewhere in Scripture is a

Model of Sharing

What God was saying through Joseph was that there needed to be some thought through

•§ prepared action

so that when the need arose there was the resources to meet it.

Today we encourage people to give to Tear Fund and often, if there is a crisis somewhere in the world, a drought or flood or earthquake, we will encourage people to give spontaneously. The difference here was the God was encouraging them to think through and prepare their giving. The famine was some years off but the action need to be now and then they would be prepared for it. We see the same principle in 1 Cor 16:2, where Paul writing to the Christians in Corinth said, "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made." The reason for the need was that there had been a severe famine in Judea and the area surrounding Jerusalem.

The point is that there should be resources set aside in a thought through way.

This is what Tear Fund are, in a sense, doing on our behalf.

They will receive our money and they will use it in Burkina Faso but also as they receive money they hold it ready for when help is urgently needed. More than that they plan ahead to try and avoid the worst effect of famines etc.

So Tear Fund is drawing together a network of 100,000 churches towards a vision of lifting more than 50 million people out of material and spiritual poverty.

The plan God revealed through Joseph involved preparation but it was also a sign of

- § interdependence

whether Joseph recognised it or not the preparations in Egypt would affect the other nations around, who would depend upon Egypt for their food. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians in his encouragement to give, was building upon the connectedness and interdependence of Christians. Wendenda in the DVD we watched expressed it in a different way when she said, "To the British people I say: we are far away in this earth, but in heaven we won't be far apart."

These are our brothers and sisters and they rely on our help.

So this Harvest as we thank God for his provision for us and as we think about the needs of others round the globe and especially of those in Burkina Faso and this model of sharing that we see through Joseph and Paul

- § what does it need from us?

I think two things. Firstly it needs a

- o generosity of spirit.

As I go back to the text in Gen 41 and I read again God's word through Joseph in v34, "Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance." Easy isn't it, send out the tax collectors to take 20% of the harvest and the people said "yeah". Of course they didn't. Who on earth likes taxes? But it was necessary and so Joseph was given the authority to fulfil the task. Paul however writing to the Christians in Corinth relied more on their Christian generosity in his appeal and so today as we hear the appeal through Tear Fund it is to our Christian generosity that it appeals. Can we find it in our hearts to help our brothers and sisters who are going through such tough times? I hope we can and the challenge to us is to 'step up to the plate' and give to Tear Fund that they may on our behalf support these Christians.

But the second thing I think we see is that

- o our giving should be planned

and thought through. Joseph looked to take 20% per annum. Paul's encouragement to the Corinthians was to set aside regular amounts so as to avoid a sudden panic when he arrived. That is a pattern many of us are used to but it needs to be recognised and responded to. At the end of the film the appeal said that with £12 a month secures meals all year round for families at risk from food shortages. That is just a suggestion but the pattern as we see it is of generosity of spirit matched by planned giving.

Now in a sense that might be enough but as I read this and thought about it I really feel that this speaks not just to our relationship with places like Burkina Faso but that it speaks into our own situation here in England. This is because in many ways if we look at our nation at the moment we seem to have gone from many good years into some bad years. The whole credit crunch is biting in many ways. Figures released at the beginning of August showed that the number of UK house repossessions jumped by 48 per cent in the first half of the year to its highest level for 12 years.

A total of 18,900 homes were taken back by lenders after their owners failed to keep up with mortgage repayments and it is forecasted that 45,000 homes will be repossessed by the end of the year as cash-strapped borrowers struggle to repay their mortgages.

In such a time there are a number of factors that we have just looked at that apply within our own nation.

The first goes right back to what Joseph said to Pharaoh to collect during good years as a hedge against the bad. I remember Andrew Corkish, who is involved with Junction 5 the debt counselling Agency, speaking about just this pattern of ensuring that we have I think he said two months salary set aside in case of emergencies.

But actually the situation is as we are aware bigger than that and involves the whole country and therefore the Government.

Joseph acted on the part of the Government of his day to set aside resources in order to be able to provide in the lean years. As I said I'm sure that none of the farmers when Joseph's men came round and claimed the 20% of the crop were having parties and celebrating. It was necessary for the well being of all in Egypt and beyond.

In the same way none of us like paying taxes but it is through the tax system that the government is able to help individuals and companies that get into difficulties in these lean times and of course it is not just in our own country. It is through the tax system that our rich country is able to help poorer countries.

So for example in 2005 when there was a great drought and famine in the Sahel region of Africa, 175,000 children under the age of five in Mali and 57,000 vulnerable people in Burkina Faso received emergency feeding funded by the Department for International

Development. This was at a cost of \$1.2 million (£675,000). This allocation to Mali and Burkina Faso brought the total amount of DfID funding for the countries of the Sahel region to nearly £4 million

Can you see how what Joseph did under God the Government does?

But of course we still don't like taxes.

Just last Sunday in the Times there was a warning that taxes might rise during the credit crunch. Now please I'm not wanting to be political and certainly don't want to pay more tax than I need but so often I feel politicians appeal to our selfishness and greed by proposing tax cuts. But it is through taxes that they are able to help people in our own country who are struggling in the lean times such as the credit crunch and also to help nations such as Burkina Faso. Earlier this month the European Commission, which is already putting \$17 million into Burkina Faso, promised more.

It is here in this governmental action that again we need a similar generosity of spirit from people of Britain so that the resources are available both to help those overseas and to help people in our own nation. Reduced taxes may be good for you and me but for many others it may spell disaster.

In this passage we see God speaking to Pharaoh about what was to happen in his country and God's servant Joseph explaining the necessary action to set aside sufficient in the good years to last through the bad.

We can see how that speaks to us of thought through action in terms of setting funds aside be it through Tear Fund, the Government or other agencies so that there are the resources available in tough times. This is part of being interdependent, whether it is Christian brothers and sisters in need or simply other humans and whether it is people in our own country or those who in the words of Wendenda are "far away in this earth".

What all this requires of us as we celebrate our harvest is a generosity of spirit which is willing to give and planned and thought through giving either by us or those acting on our behalf.