I want to take you back in time over 4000 years to the land of Egypt where there flourished one of the most remarkable civilisations in the ancient world. The people of Egypt lived for hundreds of miles close to the river Nile that provides life-giving water flowing through what is otherwise desert. They were a religious people with a remarkably advanced culture. Evidence of their artistic, engineering and technological skill conspicuously remains today in the Pyramids, the Sphinx and the tombs of kings decorated most elaborately, beautifully and expensively in ways that millions of tourists see as they visit Egypt. Some kings were laid to rest in burial chambers within pyramids of enormous size built to very precise dimensions. But it was not just the kings whose bodies were embalmed when they died. Dead people from all levels of society were mummified before burial in hope and expectation of a new life in the world beyond.

Our story focuses on a Pharaoh, one of the kings of the 15th dynasty who lived around 1700 BC. One night Pharaoh had a dream; he was certain that it was of particular significance. In his dream, he was by the river Nile. From the water there came up seven large fat cows that grazed among the reeds. They were followed by seven ugly and very thin cows. The thin cows ate up the fat cows but did not become any fatter. Then followed a second dream in which he saw seven fat ears of corn followed by seven extremely thin ears. The thin ears ate up the fat ears but did not become any fatter. What could this dream mean? The wise men and magicians in Pharaoh’s court and beyond in the rest of Egypt were summoned. Pharaoh demanded an interpretation of his important dream. But none could tell what the dream meant.

Then Pharaoh’s butler offered a suggestion. He explained that a couple of years before he had been in prison along with Pharaoh’s baker. One night
they both had dreams that had been interpreted by another prisoner, a young foreigner, who had become a special assistant to the prison governor. His interpretation of the dreams was that, within three days, Pharaoh’s baker would be executed and the butler would be restored to his position. And so it happened. So Pharaoh sent for the young foreigner from the prison whose name was Joseph.

Who was Joseph and how had he come to Egypt? He was a Hebrew whose family lived in the land of Canaan. His great grandfather was Abraham (who years before had left the city of Ur under the call of his God and become a nomad), his grandfather Isaac and his father Jacob – the three great patriarchs of the Jewish faith and nation. Joseph was one of Jacob’s twelve sons, in fact the favourite son to whom he gave a special coat of many colours. As a teenager, he was something of a dreamer; he told his family of a dream in which all his brothers and his parents bowed down to him. His brothers hated him for his dreams and were very jealous of Joseph. One day they had an opportunity, when out in the field, to sell him to some passing traders from Midian who were on their way to Egypt. So Joseph arrived in Egypt where he was bought as a slave by Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials. Joseph’s capability was soon evident to Potiphar who put him in charge of his household. But Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph who ran off leaving her with his cloak. To Potiphar she accused Joseph of being the seducer. So Joseph had landed in prison where, his capability being again recognised, he was given management responsibility.

So Joseph stood before Pharaoh who recounted his dreams of cows and ears of corn. After explaining that he could only provide the interpretation God gave to him, Joseph told Pharaoh the meaning of his dreams. Both parts of the dream had the same meaning; they reinforced each other because the message was important. The next seven years, Joseph said, would be years of plenty with very good harvests. After that would follow seven years of famine with very poor harvests. Joseph was, in fact, passing on a climate forecast for Egypt and the surrounding region for the next fourteen years. He told Pharaoh that’s the forecast demanded immediate action – no time must be lost. During the 7 years of plenty, surplus grain should be carefully and extensively stored so as to provide for the seven years of famine that followed. The plans that Joseph presented seemed good to Pharaoh who put Joseph in charge of the whole action programme. He became the climate supremo ranking only second to Pharaoh in the government of Egypt.

Under Joseph’s leadership the programme rapidly took shape. Very large quantities of grain were stored during the first seven years. Then, as famine gripped the country, the storehouses were opened and grain sold to the needy people. The famine was also severe in the surrounding countries, in particular in the land of Canaan. From there Joseph’s brothers journeyed the 300 miles or so to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph recognised them and without letting them know who he was gave them particular and worrying attention. On their third visit, he let them know he was their brother, who they had sold into Egypt. There was great rejoicing and Joseph arranged for his father and brothers to move to Egypt with their flocks and herds so as to escape the rest of the famine.

Joseph is an important figure in the religious history of Jews, Christians and Moslems being one of the most important stories in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures (Genesis chapters 37-47) and in the Qur’an, sura (chapter) 12, 4-102.

When Joseph made himself known to his brothers he said to them, ‘Do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land and for the next five years there will not be ploughing or reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here but God.’ (Gen 45 5-8) To believers in God, the story conveys a message of a God who cares for people and accomplishes their salvation from disaster through detailed preparatory arrangements including, in this case, putting Joseph through a programme of training for the important management task he was to be given.

What is the particular message of the story to us today? We face a climate crisis of enormous magnitude and proportions, not local but global, not of 7 years duration but lasting indefinitely. Information about it has not come through dreams but through science. Many hundreds of scientists representing the world scientific community have got together, through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to provide the necessary climate forecast and to propose to governments what needs to be done.
To many science and God are not connected. But to many scientists, God is part of the story. For instance, they ask the question, ‘Where do the laws of nature come from’? Scientists do not invent them, they discover them. Belief in a Creator God, responsible for the Creation in the first place and for maintaining the creation in being, leads us to see science as God’s science. A core belief in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures is that we are made in God’s image. A key component of that image is creativity – we are meant to be creative just as God is creative. To Joseph God gave the ability to interpret dreams connected with the future. To scientists today God gives the ability to interpret scientific information related to the future and to propose actions that need to be taken to avoid harm, loss, destruction or calamity.

What are the messages scientists have uncovered about the world’s climate over the next few decades and centuries? First there is compelling evidence that the world is warming and the climate changing - largely because of humans burning coal, oil and gas. Secondly, increased global temperatures make climate extremes more likely. For instance, a heat wave in central Europe in 2003 of unprecedented intensity led to the premature deaths of over 20,000 people. Higher temperatures also lead to more energy entering the atmosphere’s circulation that in turn brings more frequent and intense floods, droughts and storms. Further, because ocean water expands as it warms and because of increased melting of ice in Polar Regions, the sea level is rising at a rate of about one metre per century.

These climate change impacts are already evident. Within a few decades they will severely affect billions of people in many parts of the world. The damage will be greatest for poor countries in the developing world – it is there that climate extremes will be most severe and where there is little capability to adapt to them. By the second half of this century, billions of people will be affected and there could be hundreds of millions of environmental refugees whose homes are no longer habitable either because of rising sea level, gross flooding or persistent drought.

The impact on the world’s ecosystems will also be large. Many species are already threatened by the destruction of tropical forests; climate change is adding to this. Most of us know of the effect on polar bears. That, however, is only the tip of the iceberg! Millions of species are likely to be lost in the coming decades.

Those of us in rich countries need to be reminded that, over 200 years since the industrial revolution, we have grown rich through cheap energy from the burning of fossil fuels. We have not realised its effect on the world’s climate nor that the damage falls disproportionately on the world’s poorest. There is therefore an inescapable moral imperative for rich countries to avoid further damage by rapidly reducing their carbon emissions and to share their wealth and skills with developing countries to enable them to build their economies sustainably.

For Christians this imperative comes over with particular potency. We live in times when we are raping the Earth and exploiting the poor. The flow of wealth in the world is overwhelmingly from the poor to the rich – a statistic that should make us all blush with shame! The Bible, from its first chapters, through the prophets, the ministry of Jesus and to its last book, puts high priorities on caring for the Earth and caring for the poor.

What can we do? Much detailed advice is available from environmental organizations and aid agencies.
such as Tear Fund and Christian Aid. We need to work hard to reduce our personal carbon footprint – e.g. through buying green electricity and ensuring that our homes, shopping and transport are as energy efficient and carbon free as possible. Through our churches and communities we need to provide aid to poorer countries to help them adapt to the damaging impacts of climate change and to develop in sustainable ways. We also need to press our government, through national and international action, to move rapidly towards zero carbon emissions. In December 2009, the world’s nations meet in Copenhagen to set targets and a timetable for action. Christians are calling for worldwide prayer and many are saying it is the most important meeting the world has ever seen.

Four thousand years ago Joseph had seven years to prepare for his climate crisis. Today, action is required just as urgently. Global carbon emissions are still rising rapidly. Within about seven years, well before 2020, global emissions need to peak and begin rapidly to reduce – an extremely challenging goal. The means to achieve it are available and the cost affordable. But is the will there to do it?

A tremendous challenge and unmistakeable opportunity are presented to the world’s Abrahamic faith communities, Jews, Christians and Moslems, to shoulder these God-given responsibilities. God is there to help us do it. Those of us in the rich world could partner together with those in the developing world, sharing our wealth and our skills, and demonstrating our love for God and love for our neighbours wherever they may be. It was Jesus who said when talking about stewardship, From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.

FURTHER READING

Global Warming, Climate Change and Sustainability: Challenge to Scientists, Policy Makers and Christians, JRI Briefing Paper 14 – downloadable from JRI website and available from the JRI office


Information on relevant books is available on the JRI website, for instance:

Creation in Crisis, Christian Perspectives on Sustainability (ed R. S. White), SPCK 2009


Sir John Houghton, CBE FRS, formerly Oxford Professor of Atmospheric Physics, chief executive of the Meteorological Office and Co-Chairman of the IPCC Scientific Assessment, is President of The John Ray Initiative.