Feast and Famine

Thought for the day - 4th July 2014
International Festival for Business - Liverpool
by ICF chair - Phil Jump

Some years ago now, Lord Adair Turner, then the head of the Financial Services Authority was interviewed by the Financial Times - at the heart of the conversation was one simple question: How come this financial crisis happened? What went wrong? What can we learn? The conversation was broad and varied, but eventually Lord Turner summarised things with the simple recognition – “we spent the benefit of years of surplus, instead of keeping it to sustain us through the period of deficit”. His interviewer was quick to respond “so why not – why didn’t we?” Lord Turner’s answer in effect was “we didn’t realise we had to.”

At around the same time, there was a popular Saturday evening TV programme “Any dream will do”. Through it Lee Meade shot to fame as the lead character in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s revival of his classic musical “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat”. The songs and the story from this musical are embedded in our popular psyche.

But what do these two realities have to do with one another? The answer emerges when we recognise that the story of Joseph is the story, amongst other things, of how a nation fares through a period of economic prosperity followed by a significant, potentially devastating, downturn; it is the story of a nation putting into practice that policy that Lord Adair suggested that no-one today recognised as necessary – during the years of plenty, make provision for the years of famine.

I have no great truck with Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical, or the idea of using it as the basis for popular Saturday night entertainment, but I sense that it also represents how today’s society treats God’s word and message. On the whole, people are not antagonistic and in fact, in small doses, quite like the odd verse, thought or story from the Bible. Like Joseph and his dreamcoat, it can offer a heart lifting distraction from the toils and troubles of this world.

But the thought that we might actually begin to build our society, our values, our lifestyles and yes even our economic and business policies around it – well that’s an altogether different matter. Yet this is precisely why God has given us His Word, its primary function its not to be the basis of some rather catchy tunes and lyrics, but to shape the communities we build in the world that God has made.

The story of Joseph is the story of a God of Covenant, a God of promise, provision and faithfulness – it is an invitation to place our trust in that God in every circumstance. And within the narrative, it is not just Joseph himself who is prepared to do that through some pretty challenging circumstances, other key players in the story are invited to embrace the same principle.

Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, is probably the most powerful man on earth at the time. He is ruler of a highly developed and sophisticated nation, and yet is prepared to place that nation’s fortunes into the hands of a foreign
slave, convicted as a sex-offender (albeit unjustly) on the basis of what that individual declares that God has revealed to him. For all his power and authority, Pharaoh is not seduced by his own self-importance to the point that he is not willing to listen to the voice of the divine. Pharaoh is prepared to believe that, through a dream, God has something to say to him about how his nation is ruled and governed.

Eight years on, when his nation was plunged into famine and potential economic ruin, Pharaoh did not shrug his shoulders and say “we never realised the need to make provision” he commanded that the doors of the storehouses be flung open so that his own people, and the nations around could continue to enjoy prosperity.

Centuries later, as we reached for our phones to vote for our favourite Joseph, it never seemed to dawn on us that this story had more to offer us that a choice of talented, good-looking leading men. We chose our Joseph, while economists, politicians and bankers oversaw financial collapse by ignoring the basic message of the story. We consigned the Bible’s truth to the category of light entertainment, and quite literally will be paying the price for generations to come.

This is why it is vital for us to sustain a Christian presence at this International Business Festival. Through these prayer meetings, through the Faith Zone in the Port of Liverpool building, we are making that declaration afresh. God is not the God of our spare time alone, God has something to say about the way we do business, about how we engage with and treat one another, about trading with justice and what we do with any wealth accumulated through our business endeavours.

We live in an era when the calamitous consequence of doing business in an ethical and moral vacuum is all too evident. Whether through people trapped in poverty and forced to work in conditions that amount to little more than slavery, through the environmental cost of unregulated consumption of the earth’s resources or the economic cost of debt-ridden nations in the west – the calling of God’s people is clear, God has something to say about the way we do business and God calls his people to say it.

Let us pray for people like Archbishop Justin as he works to challenge unjust business practice;

Let us pray for Christian business leaders, that they might have the courage and wisdom to apply the principles of faith to their organisation;

Let us pray for those who will visit our city for the IFB, that they might not only catch a glimpse of the business opportunities before them, but of the values and ethics that are vital for the common good of all;

Let us pray for ourselves, that we might declare with clarity, the message of God’s Kingdom in every context and circumstance.