

Genesis 41:17-24

[17](#) Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “In my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile;  
[18](#) and seven cows, fat and sleek, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass.  
[19](#) Then seven other cows came up after them, poor, very ugly, and thin. Never had I seen such ugly ones in all the land of Egypt.  
[20](#) The thin and ugly cows ate up the first seven fat cows,  
[21](#) but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had done so, for they were still as ugly as before. Then I awoke.  
[22](#) I fell asleep a second time and I saw in my dream seven ears of grain, full and good, growing on one stalk,  
[23](#) and seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouting after them;  
[24](#) and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. But when I told it to the magicians, there was no one who could explain it to me.” (NRSV)

My dear friends

“Anyone who has visions should go to the doctor!” That was how former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt once replied answered a journalist’s question: “What is your greatest vision?” Later, when it had become a quotable quote, he said that it was a stroppy answer to a silly question. In Austria this phrase is attributed to a former Austrian chancellor from the 1990s, Franz Vranitzky, who never uttered it. Yet it would have been typical of him. A banker, he belonged to that generation of politicians that started pragmatically comparing governing a nation with running a company. They were interested in optimization and increasing efficiency, and not for great social policy visions. Utopias were over. People even talked of the end of history.

“Anyone who has visions should go to the doctor!” The statement has also typified our diaconal ministries since the 1990s. We have professionalized and moved from being diaconal institutions to becoming diaconal enterprises. Business management has taken over and we have learned to use all its instruments – from the ‘balance score card’ to the organizational form of diaconal companies with all their competing subsidiaries with limited liability. And now we are moving towards ‘cooptition’

(cooperative competition) as the latest trend is called. And that is all very good! It was right and necessary – and yet it is not enough.

Where are all the dreams and also nightmares? Where are the visions that gave rise to diaconal ministry in the first place, when women and men got down to work with open eyes for the need, with empty hands, with an overflowing heart and unshakable trust “that the Lord would also give the one chosen to do a certain job the necessary strength to master it”? They trusted that God would provide even if their money boxes were empty, as with the lilies of the field and the sparrows on the roofs. “God will provide”, is something we still hear from older sisters in countries of the global South, and we smile at it. We know that – if at all - it is **we** who will manage, with our professional fundraising methods, our political skill and our strategic advocacy.

Visions and dreams are out. And yet we still dream, often secretly, and have visions at night. You can't NOT dream. Dreams may be bright and shining, or threatening and wild. The world would be stale and dismal if we did not dream. The world as it is would be unbearable if we could not dream of being able to change it. “If what exists can be changed, then what exists is not everything,” said philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, describing the constant driving force of visions. Perhaps we do not lack dreams but trust in the one who interprets the dreams.

This dream caused Pharaoh many restless nights. Fat cows that are eaten up by thin cows. Ears of corn that devour other ears of corn. What on earth does that mean? His professional court magicians were not able to shed any light on the meaning. Indeed, they only worried him more. Only Joseph, the foreigner, whom he released from prison, was able to give the dream a perspective and derive meaning from the nocturnal nightmare. And the practical steps that followed the vision saved the lives of millions of people.

Who was this man?

Joseph was a man with experience, from a rather odd family. His father Jacob was dishonest, who had deprived his brother Esau of his father's blessing and the birthright of the firstborn son. Joseph's mother Rachel, famous for her beauty, was at

loggerheads with her sister Leah, Jacob's first wife, who was responsible for having children. Rachel had her maid bear Jacob's children and was finally blessed with Joseph and Benjamin. And she managed to make her late-born son his father's favourite. That did not leave his brothers cold. Joseph, good-looking like his mother, in a brightly coloured, fashionable coat, thought he was something special, and he was. Joseph came from a dysfunctional family!

The brothers got rid of Rachel's vain and complacent son by throwing him into a well and selling him to traders going to Egypt. As slave and immigrant in the foreign country Joseph will no doubt have developed a special view of the Kingdom on the Nile. Like children from dysfunctional families, he had a special gift for organizing his survival under the most adverse circumstances. His management talent always attracted attention and helped him to get better positions – such as at Potiphar's household, where his good looks and charm were his downfall when he rejected the sexual overtures of the lady of the house and was thrown into prison. This was also a valuable experience, as it turned out. In prison Joseph predicted that Pharaoh's chief cupbearer would be reinstated and set free, and asked him to put in a good word for him to Pharaoh, which the cupbearer naturally forgot. This was also another valuable experience for Joseph. He discovered that gratitude is not a political category. Joseph, the man who can interpret dreams, is a man with much experience and, as it turns out, also a man with a talent and feeling for politics.

Called to Pharaoh, he interpreted his dreams about the cows and ears of corn. But not only that, the analysis that seven fat years were to be followed by seven lean ('thin') years is not enough. Joseph took on responsibility and organised the following process of preparing for the seven lean years, building barns and storing corn, to provide for the coming years of famine. And he will have done that with a firm hand. The story of Joseph is not a nice and friendly one. Even when the people starve during those seven years he does not give them corn supplies for free. He makes them pay. And when they have no more money he gives them a kind of microloan and introduces a sustainable tax system. With future harvests they will have to pay

20% to the government. If Christianity had existed in those days perhaps some of his employees would have called him un-Christian.

But there is one thing that this good-looking young politician and efficient manager from a dysfunctional family never lacks: trust in God and faith that he will do the right thing through this trust and through God's gift to him of interpreting dreams and putting the meaning into practice. Again and again he underlines that his actions, i.e. God's actions, have saved the lives of many people. The dream, the vision, had become significant, and it took effect in the everyday practice of social action and political wisdom.

Of course, the instruments with which he managed the great famine were not as refined as those available to us today in our daily practice of social action and political wisdom. We know much more, we collect data and facts, we know everything in advance, we don't leave anything up to chance. And yet one disaster follows another, one crisis the next. No one could have dreamed of the scale of the bank crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, the Greek nightmare or the mass exodus from war-torn Syria.

Do we still confront our dreams, the utopias just as the nightmares?

Do we still trust ourselves to take visions seriously? Do we let ourselves be challenged by them in their ambivalence? Or has it become second nature for us to send those who have visions to the doctor for tranquillizers to enable them sleep deeply again?

Every dream seems to smash against the crash barrier of constraints. The dream of peace in Syria is shattered by the geopolitical interests of neighbouring states. Each and every one of us can think of dozens of reasons why the war will drift on for years still. The vision of a world in which no one starves any more, no one is broken by market distribution mechanisms, and that no one needs to live in poverty in the richest countries in the world – this vision is shattered by the doctrine of competition, based on the idea that individuals are only motivated to work hard and be creative when they suffer scarcity. There is a lack of courage to dream!

But there is also a lack of those who can interpret dreams. We are used to placing our destiny in the hands of people who are decent and well brought-up, well trained experts, an elite that mostly comes from well-educated parental homes. They know how it works and how to do it. That is fine and it gives us security. Even after the great crash when they had to revise all their forecasts, the economists and banking experts were bursting with self-confidence in the TV chat shows and that was reassuring. Our dream-interpreters ('magicians' in the NRSV translation) do not include many people from dysfunctional families, with fraudulent parents, victims of human trafficking with experience of sexual abuse and prison. Or anyone who has come to the country as a stranger and survived despite all hostility and knows the hidden depths of human life. Who knows - perhaps, at this very moment, someone is crossing the border at Nickelsdorf or Passau who will be able to interpret our dreams and give them meaning and a sense of reality again.

And talking of trust in God! Do we still trust ourselves to trust in God? Do we think God is capable of achieving anything at all? When one of the older sisters says: "The Lord will provide", a smile comes to our lips. A nostalgic smile - yes, that used to be so, we think. A friendly, amazed smile, that this still exists, this naive trust in God; and a rather mocking smile, since we know that we have to use all our skill and competence to ensure that the end of the dreams does not mean insolvency. Yet beware! In all this competence, in all these measuring and planning instruments, we risk losing our trust in God. That is because trusting God has a side to it that we like to repress. It makes us insecure. We feel safest when we think we have everything under control, everything in view and can estimate all the consequences. Yet trusting in God also means having to rely on someone else, as Joseph did. Living responsibly means also knowing that it is ultimately Another who causes us to dream and enables us to bring our dreams to life, putting them into practice with our experience, with our gifts, instruments, our training and skills. Ultimately trusting in God also means taking risks.

Yet even in high-level politics trust in God sometimes shines through and the great dream and vision becomes visible - even if it means daring to take a risk.

Regarding the refugee movements to Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel said recently: "We will manage," and that was a statement from a pastor's daughter, imbued with trust in God, conveying assurance and well aware of the risks involved. After all, trusting in God contains incredible possibilities of seeing dreams come true, but also the risk that not everyone is capable of such faith and trust.

Someone with visions does not need a doctor. We need dreams and people who give them meaning. People who interpret dreams like Joseph need experience, which we gain as we go through life. Having a difficult family can help us. Interpreters of dreams need the ability to recognize needs; they need powers of analysis and the courage not to just let politicians do what suits them if this does not serve life. And such dream-interpreters should be up to date and know how to use their instruments. The be-all and end-all, however, is that in order to bring dreams to life we need trust in God, a generous portion of it, and not too little.

"The Lord will provide!"

AMEN