

Luke 12:1 – 7: Yeast

What's the connection between a jar of Marmite and a pint of beer? Marmite is a by-product of brewer's yeast. Still made today in Burton-on-Trent, one of the centres of the brewing industry in this country.

In making beer, yeast converts sugar into alcohol. What else do we use yeast for? Making bread. Yeast eats up sugar and gives off CO₂. Trapped by gluten to make bread spongy and light.

So what is yeast? Scientists tell us it's a single cell fungus. For bread-making, until about 1825, yeast was sold as a liquid. Then it was pressed to remove most of the water to make what today is called fresh yeast. You can still buy it, but it's not used very much now. For home baking, we mostly use dried yeast. There are two sorts: one which you stir in with sugar and warm water; and instant yeast which you simply add directly into the flour – this is the sort you need if you're using a bread-maker.

The old-fashioned word for yeast is **leaven**. The Jews celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread – a seven-day festival which is held immediately after Passover. *For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day until the seventh must be cut off from Israel.*

Exodus 12:15

The Israelites were told to get rid of every trace of yeast. This has always puzzled me: where did the yeast come from after the seven days were up? The answer is: they simply mixed flour and water, and left it for several days. It would begin to ferment – really to go rotten and give off smelly gases. This would then form the basis of yeast – leaven that would be added to dough.

It's thought that several thousand years ago, a baker – not wanting to waste anything – decided to cook the fermenting flour and water – and he was the first to appreciate the wonderful smell of freshly cooked bread.

But fermenting dough itself doesn't smell very nice – it's definitely off! That's why in OT times it was used as symbol of uncleanness, of impurity. So, when God commanded that all yeast be removed from the house for the feast of Unleavened Bread, he was reminding people of their need for absolute purity.

Listen again to what Jesus had to say about yeast.

Read v1

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy."

Three things we can learn about yeast:

Yeast is hidden from sight

Jesus saved his fiercest criticism for the scribes and Pharisees, who led an outwardly godly life; they looked fine on the outside, but inside he said that they were full of rottenness. But Jesus isn't speaking to them here; was speaking: *first to his disciples*. He warned *them* and he wants to warn us, too: be on your guard against hypocrisy.

Some years ago, Janet and I were returning from France on the SeaCat – the hydrofoil. The weather was extremely stormy, and it was touch and go whether the SeaCat could sail. The sailings were delayed, and we waited in the departure lounge, where there were no-smoking signs. Also waiting were some scruffily-dressed men; one about my own age in a baseball cap; they had cases of lager – they'd obviously been on a booze cruise – and stood there smoking. I confess, I was filled with self-righteous indignation.

Well, we eventually boarded the ferry, and as we rounded the harbour arm at Boulogne, the boat pitched so violently that a muster-station notice crashed from the wall onto the floor, cupboard doors flew open scattering drinks cans everywhere. Janet and I staggered – crawled almost – to the back of the ship, where the motion was less violent. We stood in the fresh air; but it was no good; I was weak at the knees – no use to anyone. Janet was even worse, and I knew she was going to be sick. Just then, the man in the baseball cap stepped forward, a can of lager in his hand, and held Janet up. He held a sick-bag for her while she was sick. Mrs Lager came up and gave her a drink of water. They calmly held on to my wife while I was useless. He finished his drink, and made himself a roll-up, then reached for another can! And God said to me: Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a close relative of self-righteousness, like yeast, a hidden sin.

Yeast is hidden from sight. You can't see it when it's added to flour. When we first knead dough, it doesn't look or feel any different – it's just sticky flour and water. But after a bit, something wonderful happens – the dough swells, it becomes smooth, light and elastic. So with us, when we give in to secret sin, initially, we may look same as usual. We fool ourselves into

thinking it's not going to make any difference. No-one will find out. But God sees.

Read vv2, 3: *There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs.*

How would we feel if our secret thoughts were proclaimed from rooftops? Imagine walking around with a loudspeaker on your head, telling everyone what you were thinking. This is scary stuff, isn't it!

Although Jesus tells us so much about God's love, he also says, Fear God.

Read vv4, 5: *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.*

Jesus calls his disciples 'my friends', but these are chilling words from our Saviour as he talks about hell. Perhaps we're too casual about the serious effect of sin. Like yeast, our sin is hidden from sight.

Our second heading:

Yeast goes on growing until it fills the whole batch

In one of his letters, Paul speaks sternly to the church at Corinth: *Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Corinthians 5:6 – 8*

We may believe that we can keep that secret sin under control; but one day, unless we ask for God's help, it will take hold; like yeast it will continue to grow and we'll find that we're in slavery to sin.

When I was teaching, about 200 years ago, a new member of staff joined my Maths department. He soon became popular with pupils and staff. But one day about half-way through his first term, he was absent for a couple of days. He didn't give me any explanation, just brought a vague doctor's note. I said to him to let me know in future if he was ill, so that I could cover his work more easily. But then, it happened again: a week this time. His landlady (whom I knew) said that she'd found a dozen or more empty whisky bottles. His secret was out: he was an alcoholic. This addiction had ruined his first marriage; and now his second one was on the rocks. Soon

after this, he left to start a new life abroad, and we lost touch. No-one sets out to become an alcoholic. No one sets out to allow sin to become their master.

Like yeast filling all the dough, sin can take over our lives. The Bible says that, without Christ, we're slaves to sin – we have no choice: if we do nothing about it, sin will eventually rule over us and take us to a lost eternity. But the good news is that Jesus has conquered sin, and as we put our trust in him, he gives us the power to overcome temptation. **1 Corinthians 10:13:** *God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.* As we trust in Jesus, we're no longer slaves to sin, and in Christ, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

When our work is done, yeast goes on working

Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, Jesus said. But he also told these parables: *"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about thirty kilograms of flour until it worked all through the dough." Matt 13:31 – 33*

Jesus's hearers would be familiar with yeast as a symbol of rotteness, so to hear that the kingdom of *heaven* is like yeast must have made them sit up and listen! This is a huge amount of flour – 30 kg, 20 bags! If you've ever kneaded bread dough, you'll know it's jolly hard work. This woman wasn't put off by her enormous task; her job was to knead and work the dough, stretching the gluten, to allow the gas produced by the yeast to be distributed evenly. Eventually, her job was done, and she could allow the yeast to work its unseen magic as it filled the whole batch of dough.

There's such huge need in the world: wars between nations; modern-day slavery; billions with insufficient food, and without a reliable source of clean water or proper sanitation. The list seems endless and it's easy to get depressed, the task seems overwhelming. And we think, what can we do? Have faith, Jesus says. He doesn't expect us to have enormous faith – just faith like a little mustard-seed or a tiny amount of yeast. So, have faith. Yes, work hard for him – remember that woman with her 30 kg of flour – but when your work is done, allow God to do the rest. Be encouraged. Take heart. God's kingdom will eventually come.

A final word. If Jesus' warnings about punishment in hell in verse 5 have scared us, he doesn't leave it there. Immediately he reminds his hearers that they have a loving heavenly Father who doesn't want anyone to perish.

Read vv6, 7: *Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*

You could buy two sparrows for a penny, but if you could afford 2p, you'd get an extra sparrow thrown in free! This tiny bird is almost worthless. Yet not one is forgotten by God. After his terrifying teaching about hell, Jesus now says *Don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows; you are infinitely precious to your heavenly Father.* This is one of the most wonderful things you can say to anyone: you are precious to God; so precious that he sent his Son to die for you on the cross. So, don't be afraid: put your trust in Jesus to save you.