

# The Most Important Question

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] well now if you would like to follow along please open your Bibles to where Alistair was reading where in Mark chapter 8 pages 843 844 if you look down the end of that reading in chapter 8 verse 29 Jesus asks this question chapter 8 verse 29 but who do you say that I am and Peter answered you are the Christ this is a fantastic passage for us to look at nine days before Christmas because our minds are full of all sorts of trivial questions aren't they what did I buy my wife last year for Christmas I just I should ask her actually so that I don't repeat the mistake who's going to sit beside who at Christmas dinner and are we going with turkey or goose this year and have I been a good boy or does Santa know the truth and when it comes to those crackers with the toys in it how do you how do you break them so that you get the toy if someone can help me with that please come to me later and after Christmas dinner cake or pie very big question pudding well here is the question from Jesus to us this morning who do you say that I am and it comes right at the midpoint of Mark's gospel and I just want to think it through with you for a moment or two under two headings and the first is the importance of the question the great importance of this question if you get a sense of how important it is for the fact that Mark has shaped his whole gospel around it when the gospel began in chapter 1 you remember God the Father spoke audibly from heaven telling us who Jesus was when we get to the end and as Jesus is dying on the cross the Roman centurion one of the guys who was his execution squad confessed him to be the son of God and here at the midpoint of the gospel Jesus himself thinks it's so important that he puts the question twice to his disciples because he wants them to make a definitive step he wants them to cross a line and to confess him to identify themselves with God's view who do you say that I am and of course it's never far from the surface is it if you've been with us for the last months as we've gone through Mark's gospel as soon as Jesus preaches people say who is this person and when he casts out demons they all know they say you're the son of God and when the disciples are in a storm and Jesus calms the wind and quiets the waves and steps into the boat the disciples say who is this and Herod has his theories and the Pharisees have their theories they think he's possessed by Satan but it's clearly the most important question for Jesus because here he asks it not once but twice just look down at verse 27

Jesus went on with the disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi which is right at the top of Israel on the way he asked his disciples who do people say that I am number one and they said John the Baptist others say Elijah others the prophets but he asked them who do you say that I am and Peter answered him you are the Christ now why does Jesus push this question he's not after information he's not he doesn't want more Facebook friends the first question is literally who do humans say that I am it's not just men people because God's already made it clear who he thinks Jesus is and for us as readers as we've gone through Mark's gospel Mark has shown us who he thinks Jesus is but until now there's been no human being who's recognized and confessed Jesus to be the Christ mostly it's been misunderstanding and hostility and so the disciples say to Jesus look the word on the street couldn't be any better some of them think you're John the Baptist reincarnated or one of the prophets or even Elijah who didn't die things are looking up Jesus these are the highest possible human comparisons available to people and even though they're the highest human comparisons of course they are woefully inadequate because they're human comparisons ultimately you can't really understand Jesus through any human comparison but only relation to God the Father so Jesus drives the question home to his disciples as he does to us but who do you say that I am and I'm not sure why you've come to church this morning but this is Jesus' question for you and me today and your answer to this cannot be based on other people's opinions you can't follow Jesus or have faith by proxy and Jesus for Jesus to push this question on it on us means it's the central question of who we are and to answer it is not a little issue it's not a minor thing in fact to answer this is not a private opinion but it tells us not only who we are but who we think God is and it

tells us something about what we think life is all about

Peter's answer is completely astounding he says you are the Christ which is the same word as Messiah so for the first time in human history from the lips of a human being Jesus is confessed to someone greater than a prophet or a human being he is the Messiah God's Christ God's anointed one his eternal son who's going to bring the kingdom that's a very big deal those of you who are members of St. John's might remember that we spent an entire year last year going through 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel and despite the fact that some of you felt that was far too long to spend in 1 and 2 Samuel if I had my time over I'd spend 2 years in it because it was so good and I loved it you remember why we did it because 1 and 2 Samuel is about the first time God explains and gives a Messiah to his people and the Messiah yes he's going to come and he's going to bring the goodness and grace of God and he's going to rule God's people in righteousness and equity but the most important thing the more far more important is the fact that the Messiah belongs to God he is the go-between between God and his people the mediator he represents God to God's people he was God's son and there was a promise that God made that one would come who would be his son who would rule forever and ever and ever in such a way that we would be saved and brought into the family of God as his children forever so when Peter says you are the Christ you are the Messiah he's not just saying who Jesus is he's saying who God is because to say that Jesus is God's Messiah tells us what you think about God if you say that Jesus is Messiah it means you think God is the one who made the world and promised this Messiah

Messiah Jesus God is the one who has revealed himself definitively and finally through this Messiah means you believe that God saves and forgives and calls us to himself through this Messiah and at the point of your life and at the point of the world ultimately is this Messiah it's very big and everything everything depends on what you think on who you think Jesus is just think it through for a moment or two if Jesus is not the Messiah what does it mean well it means he didn't speak for God none of his teaching comes from God ultimately we don't have to forgive our enemies we don't have to serve one another we don't have to let the children come to him the kingdom of God doesn't belong to children he was wrong about the human heart he was wrong to say that his words would never pass away and there's no such thing as the good news of the gospel you see everything rests on who you think Jesus is if Jesus was not the Messiah it means we have no hope really it means death wins no one no one has the power to raise people from the dead and these stories in the gospel of Jesus raising people from the dead they're just fairy tales and fabrications death is the end no one knows what is beyond it if Jesus is not the Messiah it means there's no forgiveness he was wrong to say he had authority on earth to forgive sins and his death was well it was a futile waste of time if he's not the Messiah our hearts remain incorrigible and incurable and for those of us who want to continue with religious observance you need to go back to the Old Testament and back to the Old Testament law because the Messiah hasn't come yet there is no overflowing grace therefore your lives need to go back to Leviticus not all food is clean now you can't have turkey and ham for Christmas you have to be kosher if he's not the Messiah we definitely definitely need to stop singing all these happy

Christmas carols yeah there's no reason for joy to the world there's no basis for peace on earth and good will towards each other there's no reason to rejoice that God and sinners might be reconciled he didn't bring life and light and healing in his wings there's no reason for angels to sing and for us to hark to them there's no king of Israel born in Bethlehem everything everything rests on who you think Jesus is and if he didn't speak for God and if he's not the Messiah we can't just dismiss his teaching as harmless it means his teaching is evil he was wrong to call us to put our faith in him he was wrong to call us to suffer for him and his warnings are nothing more than scare tactics if he's not the Messiah in the very next chapter he says if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out it's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell if he's not the Messiah and that's not true what kind of person is he to say that sort of thing and maybe the [11:25] Pharisees are right maybe he does have a demon if he's not the Messiah it means life is about the accumulation of possessions and we should give ourselves to the cares of this life and our desire for more things you see everything rests on who you think Jesus is but if you've been with us through Mark if he is the Messiah it's fabulous it means that God has kept all his promises it means that Jesus does speak for God it means there is grace more grace sufficient overflowing grace and forgiveness and mercy it means there is someone stronger than death it does mean that death is defeated and that our hopes rest gladly on him and that we can sing these carols lustily this Christmas because we have more than enough reason and that's why Jesus keeps pushing this

question to us who do you say that I am if it is such good news and if it is so wonderful and brilliant the question then is why doesn't everyone just trust him why don't we just naturally when we read through a gospel like this go wow he's the one why don't we just look at

Jesus why doesn't everyone just look at Jesus and see the face of God so clearly and this brings us to the second point the first point is about the importance of the question the second I've called the barrier of blindness and this has got to do with the yeast do you remember this in the reading if you go back to the passage that Alistair read back to verse 14 it starts Jesus and the disciples are in the boat and the disciples have forgotten lunch again they've only got one bread roll with them and Jesus uses this bread thing to teach them a deeper spiritual lesson he speaks about yeast so verse 15 Jesus cautioned them very strong word saying watch out beware look out for the leaven the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod and what did they do they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread fantastic what does this all mean

Jesus looking at the disciples says there's a great danger here and the danger is hardness of heart which is a kind of spiritual blindness I'm getting to the yeast in a moment I just want to say that hardness of heart is not a subjective feeling hardness of heart is a deliberate closing of our eyes shutting our spiritual eyes to the spiritual truth of Jesus Christ and Jesus is worried that his disciples hearts are becoming hard and being infected with the yeast the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod and you know that yeast is a common Bible picture of corruption of infection which leads to spiritual gangren I once made a loaf of bread completely from scratch it was it was a great success as a doorstep but not much as bread true story and I remember putting yeast in and nothing happened after a few hours so I put more yeast in and I left it what is that not right we left it overnight and I came out and it had become like that 1960s movie of a blob you know it was sort of oozing over the kitchen yeast well Jesus gives this very forceful command he says watch out beware because once spiritual hardening of our hearts begins it spreads very quickly and it begins to affect every other area of our lives and what we do is we just gradually turn away and close our eyes to the fact that

Jesus is the Messiah of God and there are three there are just three illustrations of this kind of hard heartedness and three illustrations of yeast in this passage and the first one Jesus mentions is the Pharisees the yeast of the Pharisees and this is an example of group think you can see how aggressive they are back in the verses Alistair began with in verses 11 onwards they're antagonistic to Jesus verse 11 they march up to Jesus the word means in military formation and they confront him with arguments to test him and they demand a sign from heaven so that they can discredit him they're not asking just for a miracle they've seen plenty of miracles already in fact they have no doubt that Jesus can perform miracles you remember way back in chapter 3 they explained his miraculous powers by saying that he was in league with

Satan this is an escalation they demand from him that God perform something to their satisfaction I think they've got something in mind some sort of sign from heaven verse 12 we read Jesus sighed deeply in his spirit and said why does this generation seek a sign truly I say to you no sign will be given to this generation this this is this is nowhere else in the new testament does this word for sigh occur it's it's close to despair Jesus is dismayed by this generation the very generation to which Jesus was sent who saw him and heard him and he says we're not going to we're not going to give any signs on those terms see we will never you will never become a believer by putting

[ 17 : 48 ] God to the test by imposing your criteria on God and saying God you've got to measure up to this you can't fit God's Messiah into a demand or into your world view that's it just doesn't work that way because if you do that it makes you the centre of the world the centre of the universe but you know if he is the Messiah he's the centre and everything else needs to be arranged around him so you know some people begin to follow Jesus and everything's happy and then it quickly becomes clear what commitment to Jesus really means and we're presented with a choice to worship Jesus as the centre and to rearrange our lives around him or to close our eyes and to do the things we want to do and we harden our hearts the problem is never that there's not enough evidence it's never that God hasn't done enough to suit us or convince us it is possible we may not have looked or looked in the right place but if you have looked and you're not convinced that it's not clear to you that

Jesus is God's Messiah Jesus is warning us this morning the issue is hardness of heart Brahman and I have a friend he is an educated and intelligent man and he holds his opinions with absolute certainty in lots of areas that he knows absolutely nothing about and I was you know friends like

that I was with him and we were talking to a woman who has a PhD and she teaches in a particular area and he was giving her his opinions on that area and she began to very graciously explain actually no these are the concepts and he just he simply refused to accept it not based on facts or evidence or understanding or any knowledge and that is what a hard heart looks like it decides what's true and false and right and wrong based on what it wants to be true preference prejudice taste and no amount of truth and no amount of light can penetrate that place as blaze pascal said the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing and I think most people most of us generally believe what we want to believe and then we'll build an elaborate justification around ourselves and anything unsettling or anything that's contrary we just got to reject it and you can do that in all sorts of areas of your life and your friends may put up with you for a while and call you quaint and eccentric but to do it to the Lord's

Messiah is unbelievably dangerous and arrogant this is the yeast of the Pharisees it's a kind of a group think for them they had a very neat and tidy view of the world based on their mutual commitment to a particular tradition and they held it above Jesus and if we hold anything above Jesus what's going to happen is that gradually it will create a spiritual blindness in us and it will cause Jesus to sigh deeply over us because he will not compel us and force us to believe that's the yeast of the Pharisees but there's another example of yeast here it's the yeast of Herod and the yeast of Herod is the lie of pretending to ourselves that we're spiritually neutral works very differently if for the Pharisees Jesus didn't fit into their theology for Herod Jesus didn't fit into his morality remember Herod was sexually compromised he was like a lot of people got to the top of the heap and thought that the rules didn't apply to him and his brother had a very attractive the Greek word is hot sister sorry wife getting all confused her name was

Herodias and Herod took her and was living openly with her and the only problem was John the Baptist was moving around the countryside preaching repentance and the attractive sister-in-law didn't appreciate it so she had Herod her boyfriend arrest John the Baptist this is just two chapters back I'll read you Herodias which is Greek for extremely hot sister-in-law had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death John the Baptist but she could not for Herod feared John knowing that he was a righteous and holy man he kept him safe yes he kept him safe in the dungeon and when Herod heard him he was greatly perplexed and yet he heard him gladly see it was a heart issue for Herod he'd heard quite enough to know what was right to do but he refused to get off the fence because because of

Herodias and he tried to play the game of neutrality to live a life without any great spiritual conviction and please other people oh yes he greatly enjoyed the intellectual stimulation preaching brought especially from John the Baptist but he refused to act and he delayed and he delayed and he delayed until Herodias found the moment to kill John Herod found it easier and convenient to have the word of God locked away at his disposal down in the dungeon to bring it out every now and again when he needed a bit of a lift but it made no difference to him because changing his life would have been very inconvenient for Herod and that's the yeast of Herod not acting on what you know God is saying it's pretending to yourself that you're neutral delaying and Jesus is telling us here that delaying is deciding and in the end it led to John the Baptist's head being severed from his body his hard-heartedness is contagious it's like a yeast and as Jesus speaks to his disciples here he is concerned that they are closing their eyes to spiritual truth that they're blocking out the light of God and so he warns them very strongly of the spiritual danger of groupthink and of neutrality and what is the yeast that's infecting them and this is the third example it is simply distraction you can hear it in Jesus questions can't you I mean we continue on

[ 24 : 47 ] Jesus had mentioned yeast and in verse 16 they're talking about bread verse 17 why listen to these questions this is Jesus why are you discussing the fact you have no bread do you not yet perceive or understand are your hearts hardened having eyes do you not see having ears do you not hear if the attitude of the Pharisees dismayed Jesus the attitude of the disciples exasperates him I mean they've been there they had with their own eyes and ears they'd seen the miracles they'd heard the teaching but every time Jesus taught and every time he would do a miracle they didn't understand they didn't take it in they didn't receive it and give their hearts to it they closed their spiritual eyes to what was really going on and here they are on a boat a couple of weeks ago Jesus had fed 5,000 with a few bread loaves a week or two before he'd fed 4,000 with a couple of pieces of bread and he warns them about the danger of the yeast of the Pharisees and they say what bread yeast what they're distracted they they they couldn't take their eyes off the next meal here is

Jesus the Messiah of God and they're focused on the amount of bread in the boat they're thinking about Christmas dinner they're missing the fact that they are in the presence of God's Messiah the bread of life himself these are the apostles I mean these are the hope of our side it's amazing isn't it to see the son of God blocked by the hardness of heart of the disciples I had this is a it's remarkable the one who could calm the sea and the storms the one who could heal the leper and drive out demons the one who could raise the dead Jesus finds their resistance their hard heartedness and their lack of sight more difficult than dealing with death there's a soft heart you see is one that's hungry and humble for spiritual truth soft heart is one that when when we know God says something we seek to take action we repent and we turn we repent and we return but it's always risky and it takes the very power of God to keep opening our eyes and the lovely thing about this passage is did you notice that little word yet do you not yet see because Jesus has not given up on his disciples despite their slowness and lack of spiritual sight he's very hopeful and he knows it's going to take a miracle for them to have sight which is exactly why the very next thing before Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ is the healing of a blind man and as

Alistair read it did you notice that the healing is very strange and odd it's not an instantaneous healing it's a process healing it takes a couple of stages did anyone notice that just nod gently thank you and the reason it's here is because it mirrors the process of coming to spiritual sight for the disciples and for us as well that's why it's not instantaneous miracle just cast your eyes over verse 22 some friends bring a blind man to Jesus Jesus takes him off in private and he takes his first healing action here which I don't understand honestly he was 23 he spits in his eyes and lays his hands on him and if you want to know why he does that ask James afterwards I don't understand it and then Jesus says do you see anything in verse 24 he says yeah I see men but they look like trees walking it's a defective healing it's a half healing why Jesus batteries low

I know I think Jesus wants to show us how hard it is to come to spiritual sight takes a miracle and it doesn't happen all at once and that's how it is for us as well this guy's half seeing now he says yeah I can see I can see people but they look like they look like cedars walking around yes I can see something but it's all fuzzy and I think this is this is where so many of us are we see Jesus vaguely you know we we see but we don't see the great thing is that Jesus doesn't want to leave us with half sight and so he touches this guy a second time and we see that the man sees everything clearly that's our story and Jesus asks us again this morning who do you say that I am because he wants us to see clearly who he is the first step to being a disciple and following him is confessing that Jesus is God's

Messiah and certainly when we do that do we begin to see the wood for the trees as it is toxic influence of yeast you know group think or pretending or spiritually neutral just the distractions of life I want to finish and just say how hopeful and encouraging this is because Jesus pushes this question to us this morning because he is prepared to give sight to anyone who will come to him and ask no one is too deaf spiritually no one is too blind spiritually for Jesus and that's the point it's after this two stage miracle of healing that Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ and if you read on Peter wobbles badly later on in the gospel on the night Jesus is arrested Peter denies that he knows him he's not perfect and that's because this is the way the Christian life works it's not one straight ramp up to victory where you never fall back I don't know how you find it I find three steps forward five steps back two steps forward one step back you know and we pray that God would give us sight I think the encouragement for us this morning from this text is for all of us who are struggling with half seeing and half hearing if you feel that your heart is hard you're not on your own come to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to make himself real to you because he will that's what he wants to do and he has the power to do it so I wonder if you would kneel and pray with me in just a moment Julie is going to come up and lead us through our prayers this morning but I just I want us to gather and just stop for a moment and say our Lord and

[ 32 : 25 ] Heavenly Father you know our hearts and you know where they're hard and you know where we've turned away from you and we ask that in your mercy and grace you would not leave us there but that you would continue to enable us to hear your word and to accept it and to see the Lord Jesus and even to confess him more and more to see him more clearly and follow him more nearly and to love him more dearly each day we ask that you would continue to do this even this day Amen Lord in your mercy and you're welcome to respond with hear our prayer gracious father thank you for enabling us to worship you this morning for worship that heals and blesses and rebukes and nourishes thank you for you and for each other and thank you that

Jesus is the Messiah and that it's fabulous and wonderful and brilliant thank you that you love each one of us so personally so passionately and so wisely Lord in your mercy God as we move through this season of Advent give us soft hearts to seek deep into its blessing to the reality that as we live the bigger deeper reality is that we live in you and we wait for you and as we wait for you to return to make all things new that you are with us you redeem even our waiting and like Mary waiting to give birth we too are enlarged as we wait Lord in your mercy father our hearts ache as we think of the people of Newtown Connecticut and we take now a moment of silence to pray for them father may each parent and spouse and sibling and child at Sandy Hook School even if they've never even thought of you may they have some measure of your amazing comfort and of your amazing peace be with the family of the killer draw people to be that close to them to comfort and support enable us and those around them to forgive we pray for the churches and the Christians in that area of Connecticut to be overflowing vessels of your comfort and forgiveness and peace and as we might get angry with what has happened with the overwhelming mess of our world and even with you show us the face of Jesus streaked with tears leading the blind man by the hand father redeem this horrendous event at the very least by catalyzing our boldness to love those who feel especially isolated or hurt rejected which some days is each of us let us love those in front of us before anger goes deep and give our love Lord in your mercy we pray for our world in pain and in turmoil in so many places we pray for the warring factions in Egypt may you protect the innocent and somehow in hopelessness bring good government and unity we pray for the people of Syria again for their peace and their safety and we pray for the ongoing tensions with Israel and Palestine prevent bloodshed especially of those of the innocent and in all these strife-torn countries may your humility and love and integrity change everything

Lord in your mercy Lord God as the days continue to be wet and cold we pray for the hungry and the homeless of our cities of Vancouver be near to them provide for them hold them show each one of us how we might be generous and supportive and give us discipline to follow through never allow us in our comfort to turn a blind eye be especially with those who run shelters and meal programs may you give them strength and energy Lord in your mercy we pray too for those who go out from our congregation to serve as missionaries to other communities we pray for Catherine Gannett of North American Indigenous Ministries in Campbell River and for y'all's stronghold in Cairo pastoring and serving in such frenetic times we pray especially for protection upon his family be too with your parish in Ottawa, St. Michael's and all angels Anglican may they have deep life in you Lord in your mercy Father Father, for those in pain and sorrow in each of our lives we lift them up to you we need your comfort, your wisdom and your healing every day we pray for those known amongst us here Derek Rowena Marguerite Glenn Nora Rhoda Heather and Mary and in a moment of silence we pray for those known specifically to each of us be with them bring them to mind that we might pray for them and love them throughout the week Lord in your mercy gracious God amidst Advent we pray that you will show our hearts and minds the glorious light that your son brings into the darkness that the miraculous triumph of your humility that wise men and shepherds walk miles to see a baby and that a king is born in a barn and chooses to live as a servant changes everything thank you that Christmas comes

Amen Amen Thank you Amen Thank you.