

**A
FRIENDLY
GUIDE TO**

JESUS

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Throughout this book Jan Hynes's stunning paintings of the urban landscape of contemporary Australia, as well as one of Australian wilderness, illustrate the life of Jesus in a fresh and vivid way. Her explanations of the imagery in each painting add layers of meaning to the viewer's experience. The settings for Jan's paintings are in and around her home town, Townsville, a regional city in Northern Australia.

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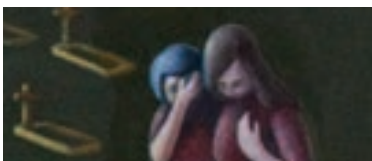
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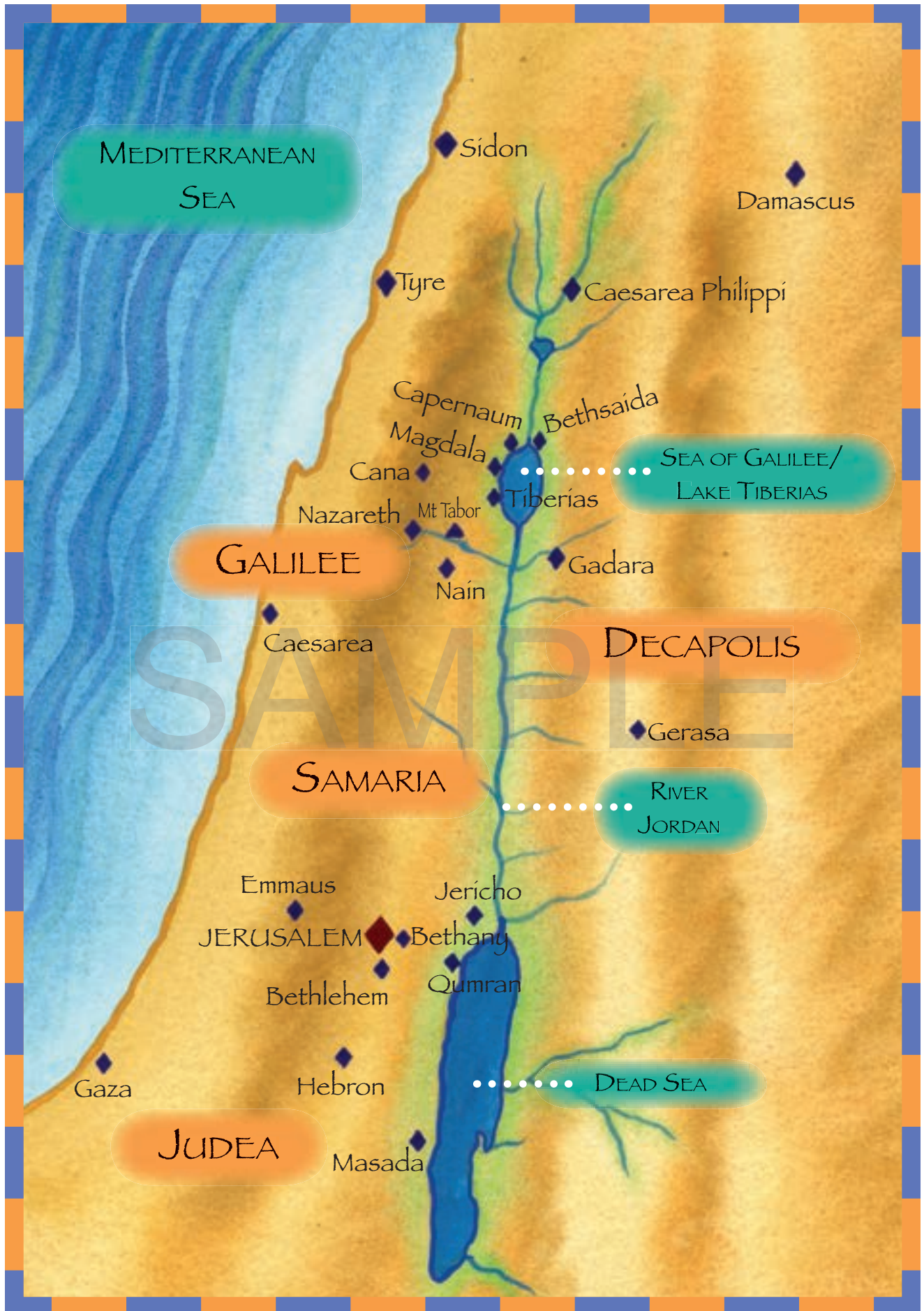
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Prologue

Recently I was talking with a group of senior students from Catholic schools. They were lively and interesting. I asked them how they found their religion classes. Some complained that they were a distraction from the real business of passing their VCE. But generally they were surprisingly positive. 'Religion classes give us a chance to talk about big questions,' one said.

Then another added, 'The trouble is, just when we get interested, the teacher insists on talking about Jesus.' There were groans and general agreement. So I asked them why Jesus was such a turn-off. One said that it was like when 'hot gossellers' come to the front door. 'They start by asking you if you are concerned

about the environment or the recession. If you say you are, they say, "Well, the answer is in the Bible." And then they go on and on about the Bible. They pretend to be interested in big issues, but what they're really interested in is their religion.'

I was reminded of the story of the big sign erected outside a church. It announced, 'Jesus is the answer.' Underneath it someone had written in big letters, 'Yeah, but what is the question?'

Young people are right to be asking big questions. They want to explore what their lives and the world are about.

But they don't just want big answers to these questions. They want answers that will make a difference in their lives. They want to know how to live happily and well. So do we all.

That is what faith in Jesus is about.



Bonding time: the nativity in Townsville

The location of this picture is a service station, as stables are no longer found in our urban environment. Garage workers replace the shepherds as they tend the newly born baby Jesus. One carries a light (the light that Jesus is to bring to the world); the second carries a tool of his trade, hinting at the instruments of the birthing process; and the third mechanic carries oil (a reference to the hand-maiden oil lamps, the good oil spiritual grace, illumination and benediction, the anointing of kings and the perfumed oils mentioned in the New Testament on several occasions). Oil is a symbol in many cultures of consecration, dedication and wisdom.

The golden Shell logo, symbolic of birth (Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, 1482) is commonly used in religious paintings. In many cultures it is linked with concep-

tion, regeneration and baptism. It is also a reference to Christian pilgrimage (St Christopher's attribute).

Joseph, being a modern father, was present at the birth and holds the baby Jesus, demonstrating the connection of bonding. As there are no swaddling clothes, Jesus is wrapped in lengths of paper towelling, the only thing available at the service station in the parenting room. Some see the paper towelling as a reference to the ancestry of the Old Testament going back to the tribes of Israel. Joseph wears his carpenter's clothes.

Mary wears her blue dress, the colour used to suggest spirituality. The dress opens from the front to facilitate breastfeeding her baby. The buttons are red (for blood) and heart-shaped (indicating her love for her baby). Mary carries a red shopping bag bearing the Red Cross

slogan of 'Blood saves lives', portending Jesus' death on the cross to save the lives of believers. In the bag a stick of bread and a bottle of red wine represent the sacrament of Communion.

The potted palm equates to the Tree of Life (Egypt and Arabia) and the New Testament reference to Palm Sunday. It is also a reference to the Virgin Mary – 'you are stately as a palm tree' (Song of Solomon 7:7).

The yellow 'The Way' sign on the driveway shows the way to salvation. The arrow points to a young girl dressed in a fairy outfit but evoking an angel as she holds a lily (Christmas/Easter lily) and a gold star (Star of Bethlehem).

On the roof is an ibis (the Holy Spirit) and three sprouting seedlings (the Trinity and the three crosses of Calvary).

Preface: The big questions

There is not much point thinking about Jesus unless he helps us see what matters. The worst thing we can do to Jesus is to tame him and to see him as interested only in small questions that are not central in our lives.

What matters is summed up in questions like these: Why are we here in the world? What are we to make of our world, so beautiful and so spoiled, with so much beauty and so much suffering? What will become of us as individuals and as a species? How should we live in the world and with other people? Are we really loveable, and are we capable of loving other people? Why do some of us enjoy such good fortune while others suffer so much?

When we ask these questions, we are not just looking for correct answers. We also want to know how we should live in our world. Christians look for answers to these questions in the story of Jesus. We believe that we shall see our world more clearly and live in it more richly when we follow Jesus.

Jesus does not answer our big questions by giving us information or telling us how our world works. When we follow him he takes us to a place from which we can ask questions helpfully. It is like the old Irish joke in which a traveller asks a local how he can get to Limerick. The local answers, 'If I were going to Lim-

erick, I wouldn't start from here.' The answer isn't very helpful for the traveller. But it is amusing because we instinctively recognise its truth.

There are some questions we can ask, but we won't get any helpful answers until we are in the right place. For example, if I am greedy and self-centred, and ask 'what is in it for me' when asked to visit elderly relatives in hospital, no one will be able to give me a satisfactory answer. I am in the wrong place. I would need to be open to the subtle ways in which people can bless me when I act unselfishly towards them.

Christian faith invites us to follow Jesus in order to discover what really matters in our lives and to show us how we can live well. Jesus' path begins with a God who loves each of us enough to create a world for us and to care for us from birth to death. This love led God's Son to become poor for us and to join us in the messiness of our lives. It inspired him to love us enough to endure great hostility and to give his

life for us. It concluded with his rising to new life and his helping us live in a new relationship with God and one another.

By following Jesus on that path we can see that God really matters, that God's love for us really matters, and that accepting God's love and being open to the love of others really matters. Because these things matter we are encouraged to respond by a simple and generous way of life.

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

John 1: 35–39



In the wilderness

The setting is Mt Stuart, a mountain not far from Townsville in Northern Australia where aerials for telecommunications can be seen (to receive and transmit messages). These aerials also represent the three crosses on the hill of Calvary. The landscape depicts the scene after a bushfire when the ground is bare and the surface rock is exposed. The country is in drought and under such conditions it appears as a real wilderness with rocky ground.

Termite mounds are common in many parts of northern Australia and are generally viewed as signs of devastation (although the termites do perform a useful role in the ecology of a region).

The lizard or monitor is a large reptile, feared by most as unpleasant. It functions as a substitute for the snake as a symbol of temptation in the wilderness. There are echoes of the Garden of Eden.

There are a number of other objects of interest in this picture. The crow – the

bird and its black colour – is a symbol of death in the mythology of many cultures. The telegraph pole represents the cross, especially with the crow sitting on it. The bush has been burnt (reminiscent of the flaming bush). The twelve branches represent the twelve tribes of Israel. There is a chasm, which hints at the chasm of the future. Storm clouds on the horizon indicate a stormy time ahead for Jesus once he comes out of the wilderness.

1: Jesus as a Jewish young man

One of the joys of my life as a priest has been to serve a small Cambodian Catholic community as their chaplain. They came as refugees to Australia. I had met many of them in the Thai camps where they lived after fleeing from Pol Pot's terrible regime.

At first we had trouble understanding one another, particularly when it came to making arrangements. They ticked me off for saying no to invitations I could not accept. And I was frustrated when I asked people if they would like to gather for Mass or for a picnic, and they would say yes, but then no one turned up. They thought that I was a bit rude; I thought they were rude.

Only gradually did I realise that what I thought to be rudeness was really sensitivity. In Cambodian culture, which was shaped by Buddhism, what matters is to live well and to make other people happy. This meant that we should answer questions in a way that makes the questioner happy. If people asked me if I could go to a wedding, they would be happy if I said yes. So I should have said yes in a neutral way, and then not have gone. When I invited the Cambodians to Mass or to a picnic, they could see

that I would be delighted if they said yes. So they said yes. But in their own culture, yes often means no. They knew the difference between a real yes and a polite yes. I still had to learn the difference.

When we try to say what matters to us, we always do so within our own culture. Birthday parties say that our family and friends matter to us. Marriage celebrations say how much it matters to us to be faithful in our love. We show our respect for those who have

died in battle in Anzac Day services. We don't need to find words for what matters. Parties, weddings and remembrances say it all for us. When we meet people from other cultures, we need to explore the ways in which they express what matters to them.

If we want to follow Jesus and learn what matters and how we can live happily, we need to understand something of his culture. He was born in Palestine. Like his fellow Jews, he found the meaning of his life and of his world in the story of the God of Israel who had made the world and whose love was shown in the history of Israel.

Jesus' relationship to the God of Israel was expressed through prayer, time spent at the temple, reflection on God's words in the Jewish scriptures, and in all the ritual that went with Jewish daily life.



The God of Israel

Jewish people of Jesus' time found the answer to their large questions in the story of their God. They saw God as the Lord of the whole world, but particularly as the God of Israel. God had chosen Israel to be his people, and they found their meaning in being part of God's chosen people.

Being chosen as God's people meant that they were loved dearly by God and were under God's protection. It also meant that they were to respond to God's choice by living generously. The Jews understood their own history as lived between these two poles of being dearly loved and of responding, often badly, to God's love. Their history was like a long domestic dispute in which they were unfaithful, were thrown out of home, welcomed back and forgiven, and were again unfaithful. They saw the meaning of their lives in terms of sin and being forgiven and always loved.

They also dwelt on the key moments of their history. They saw these as their release from slavery in Egypt to become an independent nation, and their exile in Babylon when the temple was destroyed and the people apparently scattered forever. God was at work in their formation as a people and in their scattering and return. God was also present in the Israel of Jesus' day, when the people did it hard under Roman rule.

Their history taught the Jewish people to hope that God would again intervene in their national life. They looked forward to the day when God would free Israel and would himself rule the world. For many Jews, this hope was associated with the belief that God would

one day raise to life the faithful who had died.

At the centre of Jewish life were the temple and the Law that was given to Moses. In these they found a way of living that would be happy and would please God. In the temple they could celebrate the great events of Israel's history through which God had worked, and make sacrifices for their sins. It was the great sign that God was present among the people God had chosen.

The scriptures often spoke of the Spirit of God. The Spirit was associated with God's action in the world, and was also given to people through whom God worked. In Jesus' time people waited for the coming of God among his people. Then the Spirit would be with the people, giving them life and intimacy with God. The Spirit would give them victory over all the things that made for death.

These were the large things of Jewish life. But they were also attentive to God on a day-to-day basis. They found space to reflect in the synagogue where they heard the scriptures explained and applied to their own daily life. Many, especially the Pharisees, found a way of responding generously to God's love through living by the laws governing everyday life. These laws embraced eating, washing, fasting, how to spend

the Sabbath day of rest, and who to invite to meals. Through their obedience to the Law they could make God matter in every detail of their lives.

This was the world that Jesus entered. These were the ways in which he was taught what mattered, and how this was related to the history of God's relationship with the people of Israel.

The meaning of the Law

When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.'

Deuteronomy 6.20–23

The Old Testament

The Old Testament is not a history book. It is less interested in dates than in the stages of God's relationship to Israel. Here are some of the significant writings and the way they describe God's relationship to the people of Israel.

The Beginnings

The stories of the book of Genesis describe our dependence on God, the way sin works in our world, and God's constancy in a love that outweighs sin. The stories also speak of the beginnings and the surprising twists and turns of God's special choice of Israel.

Liberation from Egypt

The core of the faith of Israel was the memory of how God freed them from Egypt where they were slaves, led them into their land and gave them a way of life that depended on God. This story is told in spectacular ways by the Books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Judges. At the heart of the story is a God who stays with the people even when they abandon him.

The Kingdom of Israel

One of the crucial decisions made by Israel was to have a king to rule them. The Books of Samuel, of Kings and of Chronicles describe the growth of Israel under David and his successors, and its later division and catastrophic defeat by the Assyrians. The people of Jerusalem were exiled to Babylon, and their faith in their God seemed discredited. Later they returned to Jerusalem, rebuilt their temple and again found God in their history.

The Biblical writers reflected on where God was in the Exile and in their return to Jerusalem. They emphasised Israel's consistent unfaithfulness and God's unfailing refusal to give up on his people.

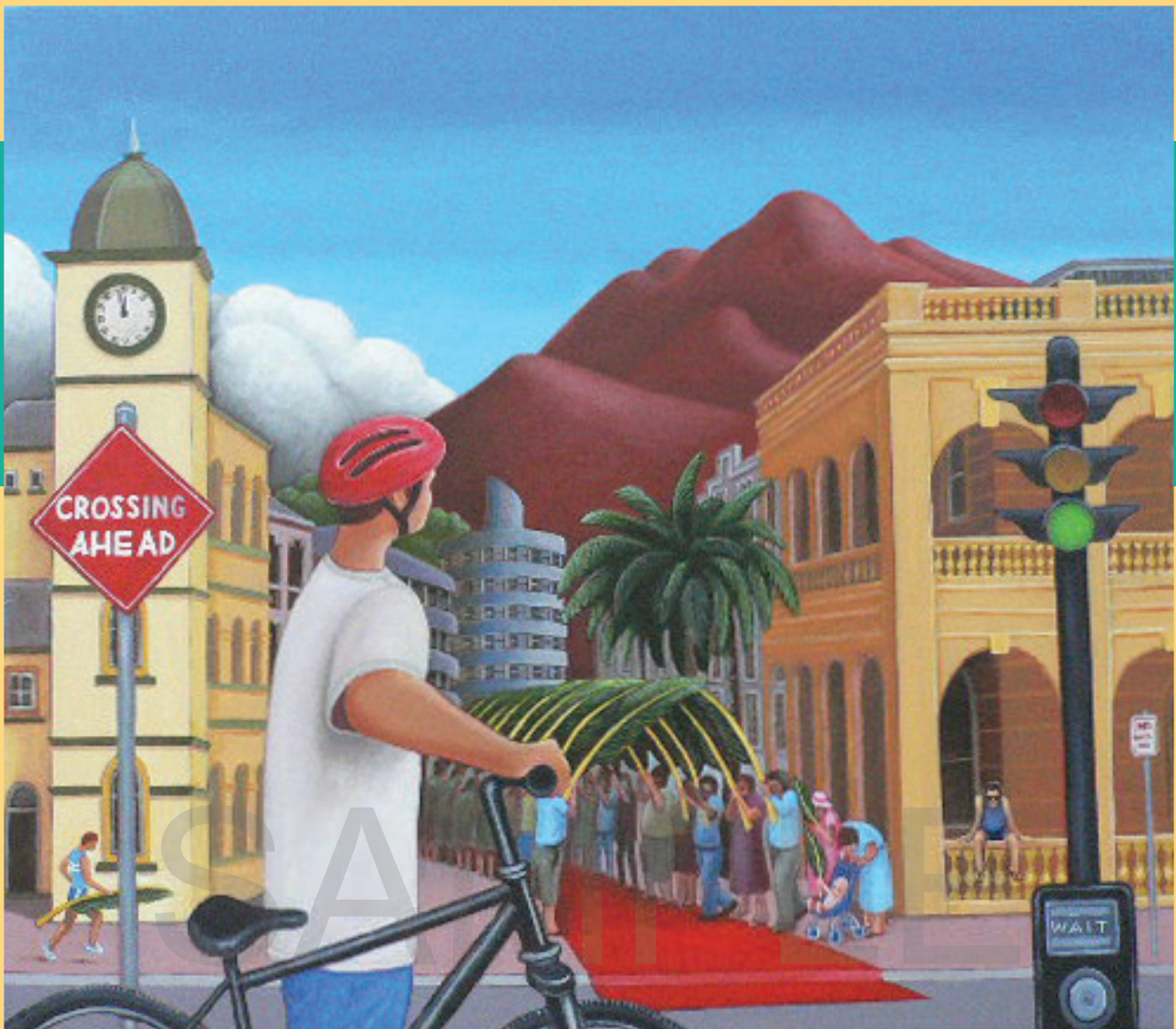
The Prophets

When reflecting on the meaning of the Exile and on how they could live faithfully, people found great help in the writings of the prophets. The prophets spoke for God when judging the public events of their day. The prophets promised

that God would lead Israel to a better time and a better world, which kept hope alive in a dark time when God seemed to have abandoned them. The prophets kept speaking about what really mattered, and how people should live.

The Writings

Many books in the Old Testament cannot easily be classified. They are often called simply the Writings. They helped Israel to reflect on where God is to be found. They include stories like that of Tobias, romances, prayers for public worship and personal use (the Psalms), discussions of challenging religious questions (Job) and reflections on how to live faithfully. They all invite their readers to recognise that God never gives up on the people he has chosen, and remind them that ultimately it is God who matters.



Entering the city: Palm Sunday

The picture shows the mall in the city centre with the surrounding buildings. Castle Hill looms over the city, portending the hill of Calvary. The red carpet is rolled out to welcome Jesus as it would be for an important official guest. The crowd forms an arch of palm branches as might be made for a guard of honour at a football grand final or for a bridal couple on exiting a church after their marriage ceremony. A jogger arrives late to join the crowd.

The clock indicates that it is a few minutes to twelve. Metaphorically, there

is not much time left. Jesus chooses to enter the city by bicycle. Asses are not an option in twenty-first century Townsville, and public transport is virtually non-existent. His choice of bicycle is egalitarian and sound ecologically. His red bicycle helmet alludes to the blood of the crown of thorns. His white T-shirt is for purity and the blue shorts are for spirituality. But these are just ordinary clothes – no fancy lycra cycling gear.

There is a man 'sitting on the fence', unable to decide what his choice will be. Several street signs allude to Jesus' dilem-

ma. A red sign (blood) reads 'CROSSING AHEAD' and warns of the imminent death on the cross. A traffic light shows green to cross the street, but also says 'WAIT'. On the other side of the street, a parking sign reads 'NO STANDING', portending that once the decision has been made there is no stopping or going back.

Where is the Holy Spirit? It could be in the dark storm clouds gathering in the background. It could be in the young child in the stroller. It is the viewer's choice.