

# JESUS UNBOUND

the story of Jesus of Nazareth

Jonathan Holland



ACORN PRESS

Published by Acorn Press Ltd, ABN 50 008 549 540

Office and orders:

P O Box 282

Brunswick East

Victoria 3057

Australia

Tel/Fax (03) 9383 1266

International Tel/Fax 61 3 9383 1266

Website: [www.acornpress.net.au](http://www.acornpress.net.au)

© Jonathan Charles Holland 2008

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, no part of this work may be reproduced by electronic or other means without the permission of the publishers.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Holland, Jonathan, 1956-

Title: Jesus unbound: the story of Jesus of Nazareth / Jonathan Holland

ISBN: 9780908284771 (pbk)

Subjects: Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ--Significance.

Lent.

Dewey Number: 232.9

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Cover image: 'Sacrifice'® by Kerry Holland

Cover, text design & layout: Cogdell Design & Fine Art [www.graemecogdell.com.au](http://www.graemecogdell.com.au)

Printing: Openbook Howden Design & Print, Adelaide.

“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”

Your face, Lord, do I seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

*Psalm 27.8*

# Contents

Foreword	vii
Map of Palestine in the time of Jesus	viii
Introduction	1
<b><i>Chapter 1: Beginnings</i></b>	7
Salvador Dali: 'Christ of St John of the Cross'	
<b><i>Chapter 2: Teaching</i></b>	15
Stanley Spencer: 'Consider the Lilies of the Field'	
<b><i>Chapter 3: Disciples</i></b>	27
Michelangelo Caravaggio: 'The Calling of St Matthew'	
<b><i>Chapter 4: Who am I?</i></b>	37
Patrick Hockey: 'John the Baptist in the Wilderness'	
<b><i>Chapter 5: The Journey to Jerusalem</i></b>	49
Kerry Holland: 'Sacrifice'	
<b><i>Chapter 6: Friends</i></b>	59
Johannes Vermeer: 'Christ in the House of Martha and Mary'	
<b><i>Chapter 7: The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ</i></b>	69
Mathis Grunewald: 'The Crucifixion'	
<b><i>Chapter 8: John's Account of the Passion</i></b>	81
Oliver Cowley: 'Christ the King'	
<b><i>Chapter 9: The Resurrection</i></b>	89
Jennifer Long: 'A Moment in Time'	
<b><i>Chapter 10: The Continuing Presence</i></b>	99
David Binns: 'The Saints in Glory'	
End Notes	109
Words and Terms	117

# Foreword

You will find probably these chapters at once both insightful and infuriating.

Jonathan Holland tells the story of Jesus. Of course, the story speaks for itself and it is a life changing story.

But this account of the story of Jesus, while firmly based in scripture, in places includes material that you will not find in the gospels.

Herein lies this work's particular engagement. Bishop Holland does not so much go beyond scripture as attempt to enter into the scenes of the New Testament. He imagines his way into the story of Jesus, not in a wildly speculative way but in a manner akin to an artist or poet. Indeed he begins each chapter with insightful reflections on a striking piece of art and then imaginatively draws out the significance and meaning of stages in Jesus' life.

Bishop Holland does not pretend to be definitive or authoritative in his exploration. He readily recognises that his is not the only view. From time to time his imaginings will rile the reader. On occasions his assertions seem too bold. His observations and conclusions may surprise and disturb or even alarm.

So did Jesus' life!

Even if you find yourself disagreeing with the bishop you will discover him nudging you to clarify your own thinking. He is prepared to state questions that have struck him as he reads the gospels and to share his own musings and ponderings about who is Jesus.

Insightful and infuriating simultaneously, this is a faith-filled exploration, an honest searching by one confident that the Holy Spirit is leading both author and reader more deeply into the truth.

*Phillip Aspinall*  
Primate of Australia

# Palestine

in the time of Jesus



# Introduction

This is the story of Jesus told from the point of view of a historian and a person of faith to people of faith or those on the periphery of faith.

It is impossible now to recover all the historical details of that story. Our primary records are four gospels, plus a few crumbs of information elsewhere in the New Testament and in other ancient sources. We know almost nothing about Jesus' boyhood. His psychological development is a mystery, and his motivations and emotions are virtually unexplored territory for the gospel writers. Even the chronology of events is impossible now to reconstruct with any certainty. Events and sayings were remembered but when and where they happened and what gave rise to them was often forgotten, leaving whole gaps in our knowledge. We do not even know for certain that Jesus' ministry lasted three years. From John's gospel, it looks like this, but as someone once pointed out, we only have enough material – miracles, parables, journeys, teachings, healings – to fill about four months! The only substantial part of each gospel is the passion and death of Jesus. This is so central to what the gospel writers wanted to record that it could be argued that each gospel is really the story of Jesus' passion and death, preceded by a long introduction.

Trying to put together the story of Jesus' ministry then is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle which is missing half its pieces. A sort of picture can be vaguely seen, and this picture suggests some of the other missing details, but in too many places there are holes, and we have to assume and deduce and hypothesise to try and see what might be the full picture.

And yet it is good to mull over the story of Jesus and wonder how his ministry unfolded and what it would have been like to have been there. Just because we cannot say everything, does not mean we cannot say anything. St Augustine of Hippo said that Christians ate from two tables: the Eucharist and the scriptures. We chew over the scriptures, as it were, to ingest all the nourishment and taste we can

get. To read the gospels and wonder what happened is to feed on the story of Jesus and through that to be fed with the Spirit, to discern something of Jesus' values and attitudes and ways of thinking and – for those of faith – to find these things being appropriated and integrated into our own lives, swallowed into our very being, so that we can say with Paul that Christ lives in us – or at least, Christ lives a little more in us.

What follows is largely my own reconstruction of events and understanding of Jesus. It does not claim any authority to represent the thinking of the Anglican Church or the Diocese of Brisbane. It is solely an expression of my own personal search for the face of Jesus. I have spread out the gospels and put the pieces of the jigsaw here and there, to try and make sense of the picture. In particular I have placed a significant emphasis on the death of John the Baptist as a crucial turning point for Jesus, a time when he wondered about his own identity and vocation, and out of which sprang the decision to make the decisive journey to Jerusalem. This is my interpretation and some may say that they think this and other events had a different significance for Jesus or happened in a different way. That is fine. No one can lay claim to the authoritative interpretation of his life or a full understanding of his character. The early church was very wise in keeping four gospels because no one account could capture all there was to know about Jesus. There will always be different emphases and variant ways of interpreting him. But it is important that we share our differing understandings of who Jesus is for us, and what his words mean for us, and as we share our thoughts, the Holy Spirit will go between us and lead us into deeper truth and more convincing discipleship.

In more recent years, the mystery and majesty of God has increased for me. God's transcendent nature becomes so much more breathtaking that I wonder how I can approach this Being. It seems an impertinence to think that the almighty Lord of the cosmos, the divine Being who stands at the beginning of time and space and at their end, who understands everything and knows everybody, can be approached casually by me as if I am God's great mate, or even that I can use the word 'God' nonchalantly in conversation as if I actually know something about the Divine. Increasingly I give

thanks that this transcendent Being has chosen to come close to us all in Jesus, because Jesus, I find, is accessible, and through Jesus, the transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious, majestic Divine is accessible. Jesus is the gateway to God as well as 'the beauty of God in person'.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing Jesus has become more important to me, and I am encouraged to know Jesus better because in John's gospel, he calls us his friends, and wants us to know him as he knows us and wants the best for us.

I have started with Jesus' adult life, and some will ask, 'Where is the analysis of his birth?' The book began as an interest in Jesus' ministry, passion, death and resurrection. It is what he himself did and said that intrigued me: how he understood himself, why he shaped his teaching and ministry as he did, what motivated him, what interested him. In the accounts of his birth, Jesus is a passive, if central, participant. The accounts are not about what he did, as about how others reacted to him and thought about him. They are also overlaid with much theological interpretation. So I decided to follow the lead of St Mark and begin with the inception of Jesus' ministry and make my way, as it were, to his adopted town of Capernaum.

Each chapter is preceded by a painting. These paintings open up the theme for the chapter. They also suggest how others have interpreted moments in Jesus' life. Works of art have a power of their own to speak to the human and divine condition. Some of the paintings may leave us untouched or even offend our sensibilities. Other paintings will move us deeply, and reveal rich meanings and imaginings that speak to our own search for the divine. They will nudge us towards God. We apprehend the divine not only through thoughts that words evoke, but also through beauty that images create.

There are a number of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for help in the production of this book. My wife, Kerry, is one of the artists who have contributed to this book, but her contribution is more than that. She has been a constant source of encouragement and support, reading portions of the original drafts and making thoughtful insights; and with other members of my family, has

been a steady source of stability and reassurance. It was kind of the Primate, Archbishop Phillip Aspinall to write the Foreword amidst all his other work; and I am very grateful too to Jonathan Sergeant, Adam Lowe and my father, Alfred Holland, all of whom made helpful suggestions as the book progressed. Finally, I would record my thanks to the editorial staff of Acorn Press, especially John Wilson and Rena Pritchard, who gave unfailing help and courtesy and happily managed my many questions and occasional anxieties.

Finally, since this account of the story of Jesus is written from a historian's point of view, it will be helpful for the reader to have a short historical introduction. Herod the Great ruled Palestine from 37BC to 4BC. He was a 'client king', that is he ruled with the permission of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus. The Romans had invaded Palestine in 63BC. Herod was allowed to expand his kingdom and at his death it included Judaea, Idumaea, Samaria, Galilee, Peraea, Batanea, Ituraea, Trachonitis and Gaulanitis (see map). Both Matthew and Luke place the birth of Jesus in the last days of Herod's rule, about 4BC in Bethlehem, which is situated a little south of Jerusalem.

Upon Herod's death, Caesar Augustus divided his kingdom between his three surviving sons. Archelaus, the eldest, was named ethnarch of 'Judaea', a territory that incorporated Judaea, Idumaea and Samaria. He had angled for the title 'king' but local agitation against him persuaded Augustus to withhold that title. Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Peraea; and Herod Philip, Gaulanitis, Ituraea, Trachonitis and Batanea. Antipas and Philip had the title 'tetrarch'. From the beginning, Archelaus' rule was marked by incompetence, so much so that in AD6, Augustus called him to Rome and deposed him in favour of Roman governors. When Jesus grew to adulthood and began his ministry, Herod Antipas still governed Galilee. Jesus may have grown to be wary of him for he once called him 'that fox'. Philip continued to rule Gaulanitis and its surrounds, while the province of Judaea was under the care of its fifth Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

# Beginnings

This is a most unconventional depiction of the crucifixion. Painted by Salvador Dali in 1951, it now hangs in St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, in Glasgow, and is called *Christ of St John of the Cross*. The strange title refers to Dali's inspiration for the painting, a small pen and ink drawing by the 16th century mystic, St John of the Cross, sketched after he had a vision of the crucifixion from above looking down. The unusual angle to visualise the crucifixion caught Dali's imagination, more so since Dali saw it in the years after his own faith had been re-vitalised.

It is a large painting, just over two metres in height, and represents a surrealist interpretation of the crucifixion. Jesus has died, but there are no nails, no blood and no crown of thorns. Jesus hangs suspended in the air, brooding over the world. He looks strong and fit. Dali said: 'My principal preoccupation was that my Christ would be as beautiful as the God he is.'<sup>1</sup>

Below, fishermen with their boat and nets, insignificant in size compared to the cosmic Christ, go calmly about their business. They remind us of those first disciples of Jesus, who were fishermen beside the Sea of Galilee. The lake is still. Dawn is breaking (or is it dusk?); light emerging against a darkened sky. The painting is suffused with a lovely peace and tranquillity. All is calm and restful. It is as if all the violence and evil of the world has been absorbed by the crucified Christ, and now he brings to those who wish to live under his influence a peace that passes all understanding.

Unusually, we find ourselves looking down from above the cross, seeing the world from God's angle, as it were. Yet at the same time, we stand with the fishermen on the shore, looking across the landscape, as if we are part of it. We are given both a divine and a human perspective. This is the place where heaven and earth meet. The painting also combines the timeless with the specific. The transcendent, crucified Christ exists continuously, eternally,



Salvador Dali  
*Christ of St John of the Cross*  
oil on canvas 205 x 116 cm  
Kelvingrove Gallery, Glasgow  
© Culture and Sport Glasgow (Museums)

beyond time and place. In contrast, the fishermen, like us, belong to a particular time and a specific place.

Jesus and his cross have been brooding over the world for the last 2,000 years. The chapters that follow are an attempt to re-tell the story of Jesus, and to enquire how it came about that so many have been drawn to the transcendent crucified Christ and have sought to live under his influence. *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, said Jesus, will draw all people to myself.*<sup>2</sup> Where did the power of the cross come from, and what is the story that led to it?

We begin by joining the fishermen in Dali's painting and find ourselves on the edge of the Sea of Galilee, in the town they lived in 2,000 years ago, called Capernaum.



At about the age of 30, Jesus took leave of his mother and siblings in Nazareth and re-settled in Capernaum, a fishing town with a brisk commercial life, 34 kilometres north-east of Nazareth, on the edge of the Sea of Galilee.

It was an unusual step. The traditional responsibility of a son was to remain at home and care for his parents until their lives ended. Only after they had been reverently laid to rest was he free to consider more independent options. Almost certainly, Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, had already died: he is never mentioned after the birth narratives. But his mother Mary remained in Nazareth, presumably touching 50, a venerable age, albeit with four other sons and daughters around her.<sup>3</sup>

The urgency now in Jesus' mind to transcend family and social expectations in the interests of pursuing a divinely felt vocation, is suggested by a subsequent encounter with a potential disciple. The disciple would happily follow Jesus, but not until he had fulfilled his family obligation and his father had come to the end of his life and been properly buried – which could be years away. *Let the dead bury their own dead*, replied Jesus – let the spiritually dead tend to these social expectations. *But as for you, you be like me, go and proclaim the kingdom of God!*<sup>4</sup>

Why did Jesus settle in Capernaum? He may have been influenced by the fact that some of his earliest followers, including the fishermen

Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John lived there. How he met them is not fully clear. There is some suggestion in John's gospel that they might have met through a common interest in John the Baptist's activities. Andrew certainly was a one-time disciple of the Baptist, and took the initiative to introduce himself to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> He was so impressed he brought his brother Peter. Philip also was there and another prominent disciple (in John's gospel) Nathanael. Initial respect for Jesus soon became friendship. Peter, James and John would become his three great friends, and they would be with him at all the key moments of his ministry, in particular on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours before his arrest.

One wonders what Jesus was looking for in these earliest disciples? Friends, no doubt; and people with convictions about God; and perhaps too, a capacity to be passionate for something. Jesus hoped that he could channel such passion in the direction of his cause and teaching.

Tourists to Capernaum today are greeted largely by ruins, although a modern (1990) Franciscan church on stilts sits directly over some recent excavations. Through a glass floor tourists can look down on the remains of a fascinating octagonal church of the 4th century. This church has itself been built around a small *domus ecclesia*, a house-church, used for worship from the late 1st century AD, and which in turn has been adapted from an earlier house, built like a small Roman villa. It had a central courtyard and atrium and extra rooms attached. It is amply comfortable. Historians speculate that this was originally Peter's house, where he lived with his wife, and other members of his wider family. Here, they say, is the place in which Peter's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, until Jesus *took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*<sup>6</sup> But it is just as likely to be, not Peter's house, but Jesus' own, bought with savings from his carpentry business back in Nazareth. If so, it suggests that Jesus was not as impoverished as we might have thought. Mark tells us that after one of his preaching tours around the small towns and villages of Galilee, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and *it was reported that he was at home.*<sup>7</sup>

Not far from the 4th century church, another archaeological

wonder has been unearthed: a large and beautiful 4th century synagogue. (One wonders what was going on: Jews and Christians building substantial worship centres at the same time.) The 4th century synagogue was probably built over a less substantial, but still impressive, 1st century synagogue. According to Luke, this original synagogue was the gift of a respected Roman centurion. Later, when this centurion's servant fell ill, Capernaean were quick to commend his cause to Jesus because, he *loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us*.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this synagogue that Jesus probably began his ministry. The chance to address those at worship on the sabbath provided some initial opportunities. It was normal for the president of the synagogue to invite a qualified person to give some teaching. On one occasion, Jesus was interrupted, confronted by a man screaming at him, possessed by a devil. *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God*.<sup>9</sup> The resultant exorcism was enough to secure Jesus reputation. At this time he was not the only one recognised as an exorcist and healer of the sick. The historian Geza Vermes notes that other charismatic preachers also claimed miraculous powers,<sup>10</sup> and on one occasion Jesus too acknowledges that others cast out demons as he did,<sup>11</sup> thus indicating that his own activities were not unique. Later he gives authority to his apostles also to practice exorcisms and heal the sick. Nevertheless, in a small and insignificant town like Capernaum, it was stunning. *They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him'*. That evening at sunset, *they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the [his?] door*.<sup>12</sup>

A short while later, and after a night of prayer, Jesus determined to widen his ministry. A strategic option would be to make for the large cosmopolitan cities in Galilee, notably Sepphoris and Tiberias, neither of which were far away. Sepphoris had been partially destroyed in 4BC, during a revolt following Herod the Great's death. According to Josephus (a Jewish historian writing at the end of the 1st century AD), the Roman legate, Varus, restored order by burning the city and selling the population into slavery.<sup>13</sup> Soon

afterwards the newly appointed puppet-ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas (one of Herod the Great's sons), re-built the city and settled it with a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles, and made it 'the ornament of all Galilee'.<sup>14</sup> Sepphoris is just half a dozen kilometres north of Nazareth, so it is interesting speculation whether in his youth, Jesus and perhaps Joseph, builder-carpenters by trade, found employment there on building sites.

Tiberias, situated south of Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee was built by Herod Antipas between AD17 and 25 as his capital city. Named in honour of the Roman emperor, it too had a mixed Jewish and Gentile population and became a significant port for boats sailing around the coast of the inland Sea, and therefore was a key trading centre. Within a few years it became one of the great cities of Palestine and remains inhabited to this day.

Of these two cosmopolitan cities, Sepphoris is never mentioned in the gospels; and Tiberias only incidentally in John's gospel.<sup>15</sup> It seems that city life held no appeal for Jesus. It is not clear why. One would have thought that his teaching, which included a summons to all Israel to repent, would suggest the need to go to the large urban cities where perhaps greed and crime were more marked. But Jesus appears to know only one city, Jerusalem, and there is some suggestion that he only went there occasionally for some of the annual Jewish festivals. Otherwise, Jesus was not a cosmopolitan. There is no indication he ever conceived that he might take his message on some international missionary journey to perhaps Athens, Corinth or Rome. That would have to wait for Paul and Barnabas. Jesus' mind was given to the local, the homely, the immediate. So after a night of prayer, he opts for an itinerant ministry among his own: the residents of the small towns and villages of Galilee, the artisans and tradesmen, farmers and fishermen. Among these – the meek and the lowly, those without pretension – he felt at home.

Jesus, we are told, *went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons*.<sup>16</sup> The synoptic gospels (that is, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke) depict him becoming extremely popular. Great crowds began to seek him out, so much so that at one stage, he *could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter*.<sup>17</sup> We can

imagine him moving about neighbouring towns and villages on foot, occasionally crossing the Sea of Galilee to new places, once teaching from a boat, while people listened to him from the shore.<sup>18</sup>

Accompanying him were some of his disciples, who assisted in the proclamation of the kingdom. Eventually he would call twelve in particular to be his constant companions, and name them ‘apostles’. The exact composition of this group is unclear: the lists in the synoptic gospels do not entirely match.<sup>19</sup> This uncertainty of names can be resolved if we assume that one or two of them were also known by a second Greek name. It is entirely understandable, for example, that after the betrayal, death and resurrection of Jesus, ‘Judas, son of James’ should prefer to be known by his Greek name – Thaddaeus – than be confused with Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

The number ‘twelve’ was also important. Twelve is highly symbolic, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Ten tribes had disappeared from history centuries earlier, when the Assyrians had overrun the northern kingdom in 722BC and taken the people away into exile to vanish for ever. But pious Jews nurtured a hope that one day God would act to re-constitute the twelve tribes of Israel, and miraculously restore the nation to its one-time glory and completion. Twelve therefore points to an end-of-time restoration and redemption. That Jesus saw the number like this is suggested by a passage in which he promises the apostles that one day they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>21</sup>

One wonders how Jesus and those who accompanied him survived. The impression is that they gave up their occupations, and while on the road were dependent on the generosity of others for food and accommodation. On one occasion Jesus says: *foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*<sup>22</sup> Did he and his disciples sometimes go without lodging overnight? In winter it would have been bitterly cold, but perhaps Jesus planned his tours seasonally? Anyway, there was always Capernaum to return to on bad days. It was never far away, and we know that in some places he and his disciples were invited to meals and received generous hospitality.<sup>23</sup>

Luke offers one last tantalising clue. He says that some women

accompanied Jesus and the Twelve around the towns and villages of Galilee, including *Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.*<sup>24</sup> Being women of wealth, they were able to take some edge off any financial hardship associated with an itinerant ministry. But if such women had physically followed Jesus around Galilee it would have been scandalous and surely some echo of such behaviour would be found in the gospels. My guess is that it was only rarely that women followed Jesus and his Twelve around Galilee. More likely they joined him and other disciples on the occasional pilgrimages to Jerusalem, when such mixed travel was much more acceptable, travelling in separate groups. On his last journey south to Jerusalem, a number of women, including Mary Magdalene, are in the party, and are found at the foot of the cross.

So Jesus began his itinerant ministry around the tiny villages and towns of Galilee. We must now look at what he taught and the response it elicited.