He took my place.
By David McFarland

Bethlehem

Benjamin was tired and hungry. He had sat all day beside his blind father on the bustling streets of Bethlehem. Life was difficult for a five year old to understand. Looking in the begging bowl beside his father's feet, even he knew there was not enough in it to buy supper, let alone a bed for the night. They had left their hillside home two days ago to come to town, hoping the influx of visitors for the census would provide some money for the family. So far they had nothing much to bring back to a mother with twin babies. Since father's accident, it had become increasingly difficult for the family to survive. Benjamin's father scooped up the bowl; he gathered his cloak around him saying wearily, "Come on son. It is getting late. Let's go to bed. We will give it one more day. Take my arm."

Benjamin led his father down the alley between the inn and the carpenter's shop. It was rutted and steep and required care to avoid rocks and animal droppings. The inn courtyard was noisy with residents enjoying themselves. Benjamin's stomach ached and the smell of food only accentuated his hunger. Then above the commotion of merriment he heard a sound he recognised; a sound he'd heard just recently while he sat in the cattle shed at home; a sound that introduced the birth of his little twin brothers. A sound like that was coming from their shelter! Someone was in their cave; the place where they slept in Bethlehem. This was the last straw; they were hungry, tired and feeling very sorry for themselves. Then a new sound came from within – the cry of a new-born baby. Father leaned exhaustedly against an old fig tree for a few minutes, trying to hide his disappointment. He moved to turn away and leave the cave to others but a five-year-old had not yet learned such graces. Benjamin let go of his father's arm and rushed in to see who had taken over their refuge. A single lamp struggled to dispel the gloom but there just was enough light to reveal an

exhausted mother lying beside a manger and a father bending over her. The baby, quiet now, was lying in the hay. Benjamin looked at the little one in the manger and began to cry with frustration.

By then Ben's father had gingerly groped his way into the cave. He had immediately grasped what was happening and called Benjamin to him. "I am sorry," he said to the strangers. "We will find another place to stay." Benjamin's crying turned to a whimper. The couple in the cave tried to apologise but the blind father put his arms around his son and said, "Come on big boy; these people need the hay more than we do."

As they left the cave, the father halted and, without turning his head, said, "Is it a boy or a girl?" From the gloom behind them came a worn-out voice but yet one filled with wonder: "A boy – his name is Jesus – he will save his people from their sins." A sobbing Benjamin had only one response: "He took my place!"

Jerusalem

Benjamin clung to his father's robe as they made their way through the bustling streets of Jerusalem. The boy, with wide eyes and a cheeky smile, was so like his father that it is no surprise he was given his father's name. In all of his ten years the young Benjamin had never experienced anything like this. Why was it dark in the middle of the day? His father did not know either but somehow he felt the answer had to be found outside the city where the crowd seemed to be heading.

Slowly they made their way through the city gate and began a steep climb, stumbling at times on the rutted ground and being jostled by a bemused crowd. Eventually they could go no further, so they listened in the dark to the cacophony of sound. Someone was cursing and screaming; some were laughing and jeering; some around them were crying. Benjamin did not know what to think but clung tightly to his father's robe. Then an agonising cry echoed across the hills: "My God; my God; why have you forsaken me?" Suddenly the darkness was gone.

Benjamin clung more tightly to his father for he was too small to see anything but sensed something fearful was happening. Many in the crowd went quiet. "What is it father?" he said in a frightened voice. His father looked pale, not knowing whether to tell his son what a horrible sight lay before them. "Son, this is – this is horrible. Three men are being crucified. We should leave now."

Another cry filled the air; a different cry, like a cry of victory! The earth shook with such violence that rocks around them split apart. Father Benjamin grabbed his son and held him even more tightly. Many in the crowd panicked and ran for the city gates. Suddenly Benjamin could see what his father saw and gazed with open mouth on the scene.

"Who is that?" stammered Benjamin, pointing to the bloodied, limp form on the middle cross. There was no answer - so Benjamin persisted. " I mean the one with that sign above him that says, *This is Jesus. King of the Jews.* Is he our king? Is he dead?" There was still no answer so Benjamin tore his startled gaze from the gruesome scene and looked up at his father. He was perplexed to see tears running down those ruddy cheeks. Father Benjamin struggled to compose himself and hugged his son even more tightly. His body trembled; his voice cracked with emotion as he struggled to say something intelligible; a strange look came across his face. Through tear-filled eyes he gazed down on his boy. "Son," he blurted out, "that man - he took my place."