***JOE finds his voice***

 By Veronica Heley

Joe had a problem, which was his older brother, Teddy.

Teddy had asthma and spent a lot of time being ill. Their parents said Teddy would have been a gold-winning athlete and top of the class in everything, if only his health had allowed it. The household revolved around Teddy and Joe revolved with it, fetching and carrying, and generally doing what he could to make Teddy’s life easier.

 Their mother was thrilled when Teddy announced he wanted to have violin lessons. All her family were musical and she was sure Teddy would do brilliantly. Joe was told to stay on after school and wait for Teddy to finish because the poor boy couldn’t be expected to carry his violin and his school bag home afterwards.

Joe didn’t know what to do with himself for that hour after school. There were some after school clubs but he didn’t fancy any of them, except perhaps for the choir, because he did like a good tune.

So he went along to a session and discovered there were a lot of good tunes he could whistle, hum and sing along to. As he was already helping Teddy with his sight-reading, Joe picked it all up pretty quickly and began to enjoy himself.

The choir learned some carols for Christmas and Joe thought they had some of the best tunes ever.

Joe knew the story of Christmas, of course. They’d had that in primary school but Joe had got a bit muddled about Jesus being an extra-terrestrial like ET, and going around doing good like Batman. The carols sorted Jesus out from the others. This was God’s own son who’d come down here to tell us how much he loved us and how much he wanted us to love one another.

The more Joe thought about God loving us all, no matter how weak or

stupid you were, the better he understood about life, and the better he sang. Singing his heart out did something to him.

Then the blow fell. Teddy gave up his violin lessons and his parents said Joe should drop out of the choir as he wasn’t needed to help Teddy carry his things home any more.

Joe struck! He refused! Yes, he knew he was being ungrateful and difficult and that anyone else would be only too happy to look after their poor brother, who had been given such a raw deal in life. Joe felt on fire with the hurtful words flung at him, but he stuck it out. He wanted – no, he *needed* – to sing.

He got the silent treatment at home but that didn’t make much difference. Joe could cope. He practised singing in the shed in the garden. He borrowed an old keyboard from a mate who’d got a new one. He read about Jesus who’d had all sorts of threats thrown at him and been betrayed to his death . . . and who had risen from the dead.

On the day of the Christmas concert his parents were fussing that Teddy would be nicely turned out because he expected to get first prize for English. But oh dear! He didn’t get it. Teddy was so disappointed he began to breathe heavily and his Mum had to take him home. But his dad did stay on.

As the choir rose to lead the community carol singing, the teacher turned round and told Joe to sing the first verse of the carol all by himself. Joe hadn’t ever imagined that would happen.

So he sang. And it was . . . satisfactory.

His dad was bemused. He hadn’t realised that Joe could sing. How odd was that? He must tell his mum about it when they got home.

Joe didn’t suppose anything much would change but at least he now had music and God in his life.

All the way home, the carol he’d sung rang through his head.

‘Once in royal David’s city . . .’