APPEAL FOR PEOPLE IN BETHLEHEM
Coronavirus has locked down Bethlehem. Tourism, which is said to account for 65% of the city’s economy, has now ceased. For the 76% of families who were assessed as living below the poverty line before the virus hit, this sudden unemployment is a disaster. There are no safety nets of support. Friends of the Holy Land have an office in Bethlehem, and are appealing for our prayers and support. If you wish to make a donation to support families in Bethlehem, go to virginmoneygiving.com/fund/bethlehemcoronavirus.

TODAY’S GOSPEL: Jn 11:1-45
Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go into Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary sat in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying quietly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; and he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.

READINGS FOR 29TH MARCH 2020: Ez 37:12-14, Ps 129, Rom 8:8-11, Jn 11:1-45
RESPONSE TO THE PSALM: With the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption.

READINGS FOR PALM SUNDAY 5TH APRIL 2020:
Mt 21:1-11, Is 50:4-7, Ps 21, Phil 2:6-11, Mt 26:14-27:66
The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's wisdom and came "to test him with hard questions" (1 Kings 10:1ff). This sounds rather adversarial, but she was completely won over, when she heard his wisdom and saw the splendid palace which he had built along with his servants and courtiers. Now for the left hand section of this fresco, Piero della Francesca draws on an embellished version of 1 Kings 10 which is found in Jacopo da Voragine's Golden Legend. In fact, Voragine gives a number of variants, but Piero seems to following the one in which the angel had given Seth a twig from the tree for which Adam sinned, with the promise that when this tree bore fruit, his father would be healed and made well. But when Seth returns and finds that his father has already died, he plants the twig over the grave. It becomes a great tree, which lasts until the time of Solomon. Solomon had the tree cut down to be used in his palace. However, the piece of wood it yielded was either too big or too small for the existing structure. It was discarded to be used as a footbridge over a pond. When the Queen of Sheba came to this bridge she would not cross it. She stopped and knelt before it. In the Golden Legend she returns home and sends Solomon a prophetic message saying that a man would hang upon this wood and by that man's death the Kingdom of the Jews would be destroyed. Solomon had the wood taken and buried deep beneath the ground. Piero includes a scene on the back wall where the wood is being carried away to be buried. On the right hand side, we have the meeting of the two monarchs in an open portico with splendid renaissance columns and showing clear lines of perspective, as disseminated by the work of Piero's contemporary Leon Battista Alberti. 1 Kings 7.1ff says that it took Solomon 13 years to build his palace. It gives details for a part of it, called "The House of the Forest of Lebanon". This probably the location which Piero depicts in the right hand side of the fresco. The central column divides the two scenes. In both, the Queen is back by an arm and robe to robe. It like a procession frozen in time. All of these figures in different colours against each other placing the figures in different plains. There is a sense of balance and harmony. The white horse, perfectly foreshortened matches the white cloak of an attendant. The two trees act as a canopy above the group, emphasising the dignity of the Queen and her retinue. The arrangement is reversed under the portico but again the same sense of harmony and dignity is achieved. The eyes moves horizontally from arm to arm and robe to robe. It like a procession frozen in time. All of these effects are enhanced by the low vantage point of the viewer. But looking upwards, The Queen, the plank and the column are seen beneath Seth, the twig being planted and the great tree. Standing outside the chapel, the central column would be seen to divide the fresco into two distinct scenes in a harmonious and balanced way. But viewed from inside, the plank of wood breaks the harmony. It is now oddly spaced in relation to the column and so what we see are two distinct scenes. The left hand scene is like a truncated nativity scene. In the place of the mother and child we find the wood of the cross. The two scenes now bear no spatial relationship. Thus the central focus becomes this rejected plank of wood. In this way, the prominence of the column yields to the significance of the plank of wood, which became a bridge, and then a cross. Tomorrow in the Liturgy, we begin Passiontide. We will drape the cross in purple, not to obscure it, but rather to emphasise its true significance.