Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you must use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

- Ezekiel 37.1-14
- Psalm 130
- Romans 8.6-11
- John 11.1-45

Homily

Today’s homily has been written by The Rev’d Canon John Wickstead

Our reading from John’s Gospel was long, complicated and exhausting. To follow it with something which is fairly short, clear, and enlivening would be a challenge even to the best of preachers and biblical scholars.

Perhaps we should start by remembering three things about John’s gospel - three things which are all relevant to the reading we have heard:

First, the writer of John’s gospel tells the story of Jesus’ miracles because they are what he calls signs, and signs reveal to us something greater than the miracle itself. In today’s reading we heard his account of the last of Jesus’ signs – the raising of Lazarus.

Second, for the writer of John’s Gospel, Jesus is, above all, the giver of life. That life is God’s gift, and comes entirely from God’s initiative, and all this is shown through the sign of the raising of Lazarus.

Third, in John’s Gospel, when Jesus makes an important statement, it begins with the words, “I am......,” and we heard one of those in today’s reading:

Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

So, not only do we have a very long and complicated reading, but it contains within it probably one of the most difficult statements in the Bible fully to understand.
Taken at face value this saying of Jesus could be misleading. At a very basic level it might be thought to fly in the face of human experience. It could be especially unhelpful in the context of the practices which surround death in our own culture. Suffice to say that we hide death away. We sometimes speak in the most childish language as if those who have died are not really dead. In these circumstances this saying attributed to Jesus might seem to say that, if we have faith, even though we might appear to die, we don’t really.

But the Christian Faith is death-defying, and not death-denying. And this saying and the sign, from which we must not separate it, are not just about us, but they are about God our loving Father, and the relationship that he has with us in and through Jesus.

To understand this, we must return to our story from John’s gospel. In that story, Martha and Mary had only progressed so far in their faith. They thought that Jesus could have prevented their brother from dying, and Martha seemed to have reprimanded him for not having done so. Now however Lazarus was dead, and it seemed that they did not believe that Jesus could do anything about that, or, at least they did not ask him to do so. They knew he could heal people, and yet they did not understand what it was that these acts of healing really signified. They saw miracles but did not understand of what they were the signs.

At the beginning of the story Jesus told his disciples that the illness of Lazarus would lead to the showing of God’s glory, so that the Son of God might be glorified through it. That was what this sign was to be about – what the raising of Lazurus was to reveal. All those present would see Jesus’ action, but only those with faith would see it for what it really was and would understand its meaning.

Earlier in this gospel, in Chapter 5, the writer had put these words into the mouth of Jesus, “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming...when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” And then he goes on to speak of resurrection and judgement.

In our story Lazarus was dead and had been buried for four days. (“Lord by now there will be a stink.”) But Jesus speaking with the authority of his Father ordered him to come out, and, while he was still dead, Lazarus heard Jesus’ voice and came out. In this story Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”
God our loving Father gives us, in and through Christ, his gift of eternal life. “Eternal” here does not just mean going on for ever. But rather it is about a quality of life within the love of God, which far exceeds that meagre definition – a life beyond the realms of time and space, and yet containing time and space within it. It is a life which does not have to wait for the resurrection because that life and that relationship begins now.

But it does not deny the reality of death, with all the pain of loss and separation that it brings for those who still survive. But it says that we die within that relationship, for God’s love is not prepared to lose us. That eternal life is not destroyed by our death. Our Faith is surely that we die and rest in that love, awaiting the voice that calls us to resurrection.

This Faith is expressed rather well in the words used at a funeral service. As the body is committed to the ground or to be cremated the priest says that we do it, “in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In our story Jesus said, “Those who believe in me, though they die, will live.”
Suggested intercessions

Let us pray to God our loving Father, who in and through his Son gives us life.

We offer our prayers for the Church here and throughout the world:

(Specific biddings could be used from the Anglican Cycle of Prayer, the Diocesan Prayer Diary etc, and for the Diocesan Bishop(s))

Loving Father, we know your Son as the Word made flesh; may your Word dwell in us and bind us together in the bond of your love.

Lord hear us. **Lord graciously hear us.**

We pray for the peace of the world and for all its peoples:

(One or maybe two specific current causes for concern could be mentioned.)

Loving Father, we know your Son as the Prince of Peace; give your wisdom to those in positions of power and leadership, that they may seek your Kingdom, and have a right discernment in all things.

Lord hear us. **Lord graciously hear us.**

We pray for the people of this parish (town or village), for all the other communities to which we belong, as well as for the members of our own families and our friends.

(Specific brief biddings for the local community could be mentioned.)

Loving Father, your Son said that those who followed him were his brothers and sisters; help us to love and serve one another as he has served us.

Lord hear us. **Lord graciously hear us.**

We offer our prayers for those who are bowed down with grief, despair or sickness.

(Names from the parish sick list might be mentioned.)

Loving Father, through your Son you share our suffering and pain; may your life-giving Word bring comfort and healing to the bereaved and to all in any kind of distress.

Lord hear us. **Lord graciously hear us.**

We hold in prayer those who have died, remembering those who in the past were important in our own lives.

(Names of those who have recently died, and those whose year’s mind occurs around this time should be mentioned.)

Loving Father, your Son said that those who believe in him, though they die, will live; we commend to your mercy those who have died and who now await the resurrection resting in your keeping.

Lord hear us. **Lord graciously hear us.**
We rejoice in our fellowship with the Blessed Virgin Mary, (the local patron saint(s)), and all the saints as we join our prayers with theirs.

Merciful Father: accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suggested hymns/songs

- All my hope on God is founded
- Breathe on me, breath of God
- Drop, drop, slow tears
- Father of heaven, whose love profound
- It is a thing most wonderful
- Sacred head, sore wounded
- Praise to the Holiest in the height
- The royal banners forward go
- The Spirit lives to set us free
- There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
- Thou art the way