6pm HC Sunday 8 November
Amos 5:18-24, 1 Thess 4:13-end, Matthew 25:1-13 – ***How do we get ready for the coming of the King?***

On 16 June 1967, the late Queen Elizabeth II flew on a Queen's Flight Andover from RAF Northolt to RAF Leconfield, just outside Beverley. She then drove, in a motorcade, from Beverley to Hull. The Queen had come to open the newest part of Hull's main university teaching hospital, the Hull Royal Infirmary. Since the route she would take from Beverley to Hull would go within 3 miles of my village, my primary school arranged that every child in the school would travel by coach to the road the Queen would be travelling along, so we could stand by the roadside as she drove past, ready to wave the little Union Jack plastic flags that we'd been given.
We didn't quite get to meet the Queen, but we were there, ready to wave our flags, ready for our Queen, as the Queen drove past.

Our readings invite us to ask on a very important question: how prepared are we, actually, for the coming of our King on Judgment Day?

The first part of being prepared is to be real about what is coming.
For an example of failure to do that, look no further than the UK's response to the COVID pandemic. In April this year, the UK-Covid 19 inquiry reported that a big factor in the failure to plan well was that the Government was working from a 2011 plan for a response to a national flu outbreak, rather than on a response to a world-wide coronavirus pandemic. The UK Government had been preparing for the wrong thing.

Turning to our reading from the prophet Amos, Amos was speaking to people who had lost sight of what they should have been preparing for. Amos asked the Israelites *"**Why do you want the day of the Lord**?"*, knowing that the Israelites were assuming God would bring them victory over their enemies in a day of glory for Israel. But the Israelites were wrong: the day of judgment would bring ***darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it.*** There would be no place to run and no place to hide.

The Israelites' lack of understanding about God was reflected in what had happened to their worship of God. Amos' message from God could not have made clearer God's contempt for the hypocrisy of the worship: ***I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. …I will not accept your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings and offerings of fatted***

animals … I will not look upon them … I will not listen to the melody of your harps. God didn't want the Israelites' phony worship; God wanted the Israelites to care about what he cares about; about justice and righteousness; to long that ***justice [might] roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***

In 21st-century Cambridge, we too can get it equally wrong, and can be tempted to create a one-dimensional God rather than engage with the real God. To maintain that because God is love; he is therefore bound to accept how we choose to behave and that he will not judge us. But to confine God to what is within our comfort zone is to delude ourselves about who God is. And that has consequences. Because if we think justice doesn't matter to God, then we'll think justice doesn't matter in our world. If we assume God always favours liberal democracy, then we're denying God his sovereignty; refusing to accept that God might be different from us and have different values from those of our secular progressive liberalism.

Instead of seeking to understand God, we can find ourselves believing in the god we have made up, to fit in with our own ideals. In no time we find we have made ourselves a smaller god; one who we feel more comfortable worshipping. But our worship should be driving us to want what is on the heart of God, rather than our worship being shaped by what lies readily within our grasp. If what we believe about God isn't prompting us to want to please God with our lives, our worship is meaningless. Worse, it will be offensive to God.

So be real about your understanding of God: who he is, what he has done, and what that means for your relationship with him. Read the bible and discover who God really is, and about the depth and the richness of the love of God. Let the Holy Spirit show you where your behaviour is falling short of what it should be and then act on what he shows you.

Finally, being prepared for the coming of our King requires us to be realistic about our readiness for what is coming

Few of us know what is involved in getting everything ready for a royal visit. But we all of us know that preparing for any kind of important event takes plenty of planning and thought. And we also know that it requires attention and focus.

In our gospel reading all ten bridesmaids had their lamps with them when they went to meet the bridegroom. But only the five wise bridesmaids took flasks of oil with their lamps**.** Now, the wise bridesmaids were realistic and plain-

speaking and unwilling to let anything stop them from being ready for the bridegroom. So they gave the foolish bridesmaids short shrift when the foolish ones were begging ***give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.*** No, said the wise ones, ***there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.*** But the foolish bridesmaids had left it too late to buy their oil, for ***while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.***

The wise bridesmaids did not lose their focus on the bridegroom, and nor should we. We cannot afford to allow our questions about Jesus' return to distract us from getting ourselves ready for that return. Perhaps you're concerned about the people who've never heard of God, because you think it would be unfair for God not to give such people an opportunity to respond to God. Or perhaps you're anxious for the people who seemed to have faith in God, but who appear to have gone away from God. That issue, often a very heartfelt concern mustn't distract you from being ready yourself.

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, Paul addresses a question that could have proved a distracting one for that relatively new church. It seems that some of those new believers had died tragically through persecution, because Paul writes about ***we who are alive, [the ones] who are left.*** Paul is concerned that the Thessalonians are grieving as if they ***[had] no hope*** in Jesus, instead of ***[believing] that Jesus died and rose again***, and therefore that through Jesus, those who had already died would have eternal life. No, Paul wants every believer to hold on to the conviction that both those who have already died in Christ <u>and</u> those who are living in Christ will ***meet the Lord… and will be with the Lord for ever***.

And this will be no casual meeting. The word for "meet" used here is used for when a delegation is sent to meet somebody special, as in Acts 28 when the Christians of Rome receive Paul and his companions as they approach Rome. Paul is reminding us that this is the royal coming of Jesus Christ, with the church, as the official delegation, going out to meet him.

No wonder that Paul says that we are to ***encourage one another with these words.*** If we are to be ready to meet our King, we too need to be encouraging one another to keep our focus on what is important, so that we can know that we <u>are</u> ready ***to meet the Lord, … and to be with the Lord for ever.***