Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. 9 Resist him, steadfast in your faith (1 Peter 5:8-9)

In nomine...

Famously, Archbishop Ramsey was once asked in an interview about his prayer life. ‘Your Grace’, the journalist asked [they were politer in the 60s and 70s!], ‘may I ask how long you spend in prayer each day?’. Dr Ramsey thought for a while and said, ‘I suppose… a couple of minutes’; he paused again and added ‘but it takes me 58 minutes to get there’. I suspect the statistics for most of us are comparable. On an average day my diary reveals at least sixty minutes spent in acts of worship. Am I worshipping for all or even most of that time? – I suspect not, not if worship means conscious doxological communion with God. But in order to spend time on the uninhabitable hill top the hard labour of ascent and descent is necessary. The statistics may not look very promising: sixty minutes invested for two minutes return – in this day and age we think we don’t have time for this: surely there must be a more efficient way. But the fifty-eight minutes are not wasted: Here is another Archbishop, Rowan Williams, on prayer as birdwatching:

I’ve always loved the image of prayer as birdwatching. You sit very still because something is liable to burst into view, and sometimes of course it means a long day sitting in the rain with nothing very much happening. I suspect that, for most of us, a lot of our experience of prayer is precisely that. But the odd occasions when you do see what T.S. Eliot called ‘the kingfisher’s wing’ flashing ‘light to light’ make it all worthwhile. Living in this sort of expectancy… is basic to discipleship [Being Disciples, pp.4-5]

This, I think, is a helpful way of thinking about liturgy as well as prayer. Liturgy is not like the BBC under Lord Reith: its purpose is not, principally, to educate inform and entertain, though it may of course do all those things. Primarily the liturgy is a time and space set apart to point us to an encounter with God. And the time and space of liturgy begins with the decision to leave our own houses and come to the house of God. Have you noticed how the world and its people look different on the way to and from worship?

And when we arrive at the place of the liturgy, what do we find? We share in a series of words and actions – often very familiar ones – that re-orientate us:
away from self, to God. *Sursum corda*… Lift up your hearts; ‘Rise heart, thy Lord is risen’.

Lifting our hearts to God, not at the expense of our daily lives and the life of our world, but so that those lives may be transfigured by God’s grace. Knowing ourselves to be children of God, called to acknowledge that status in ourselves and in everyone else: neighbours and enemies alike.

There are some acts of worship in which this is especially clear and notable among them is Compline. In one of those humorous rhetorical exaggerations for which he is beloved, the Precentor once remarked that people only come to the service of Compline to hear eight words: ‘Keep me as the apple of your eye’! I think it may also almost be true as well as amusing. Compline in particular is a service which, for all its musical richness, is really about opening us up to a profoundly intense encounter with God. And often such encounters take very few words. Sung by the cantor [describe] in the beauty and stillness of this the last office of the day, ‘Keep me as the apple of your eye’ does say almost all that we would wish, commending us to ‘Cast all your anxiety on [God], because he cares for you’, in words from our second lesson.

Each of us has our own favourite liturgical texts. One of mine is another staple of Compline. It’s also drawn from the passage from the first letter of Peter that we heard as this morning’s second lesson:

> **8** Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. **9** Resist him, steadfast in your faith,

At the heart of that passage is an even shorter phrase, of just four words: ‘Your adversary the devil’.

Talk of the devil is best kept wary and sparing, but it’s important nonetheless. Who is the devil? He is the adversary: yours, mine, ours and God’s. The adversary of the abundant life for which we are created, from which we are saved, into which the Spirit invites us.

C.S. Lewis said, ‘It is the policy of the devil to persuade us that there is no devil’. If that is the case, then there is one sense in which the devil’s policy is correct. Literally, ontologically, the devil *is not*. Icons of Christ are inscribed with the Greek text ‘*Ho On*’, ‘the one who is’, and the letters Alpha and Omega. Here they refer to the first chapter of Revelation: I am the first and the last, **18** and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever’. Just as Christ is more fully human than we are, so he is more fully alive than we are. He *is* and in that sense the devil *is not*. 
But if the devil is not, but perhaps we must say that nonetheless the devil exists. Robert Jenson makes this point rather well:

Karl Barth [Jenson writes] puzzled normal minds by saying that the devil was a myth. Folk were alarmed: Barth, they said, doesn’t believe in the devil. But of course that was just the point: one believes in God, and in another sense in such things as salvation…but assuredly not in the devil. Barth’s point was that not believing in the devil is the appropriate relation to the devil’s mode of existence. That the devil is a myth doesn’t mean, in Barth’s thinking, that he doesn’t exist; it means that he exists in a particular way, as the ordained object of denial. (Braaten and Jenson (eds), Sin, Death and the Devil, p.3)

There are numerous scriptural terms for devil: he is ‘the prince of this world’, who boasts of having all the kingdoms of the earth at his disposal. He is ‘the enemy’ and ‘the evil one’. The ‘ruler’ or the ‘god of this world’, ‘the father of lies’, ‘a murderer from the beginning’. All of these descriptions point to the devil as the one who denies the abundant life that is of God. The devil is not an equal to God, not even quite the opposite of God, but the negation of the goodness which is God’s will: the incarnation, it has been said, of vacuity.

Talk of the devil, I said, is best kept wary and sparing. But from time to time we need to engage in it as a reminder that the direction of our faith is towards affirmation, embrace, solidarity, warmth, hope and love: all the things that the devil is not. Coming to church can look like a retreat from the world. In fact its purpose is the opposite. As Alan Ecclestone has written:

Prayer is concerned with getting things right in the scale of what matters to mankind…making sharper and clearer day by day what is becoming obscured.

Prayer is the necessary recommitment of ourselves to what is being done by Christ in his world, to the pain and suffering it entails, no less than the joy (A Staircase for Silence, p.65, p.136)

Commitment, then, to all that the devil, that incarnation of vacuity, would woo us away from.

‘Be sober, be vigilant’; be observant, expectant, disciplined, alert, eager and engaged – all of the virtues in which the liturgy schools us – ‘because your adversary the devil, like a roaring lion, prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith’. 