O do well unto thy servant * that I may live, and keep thy word.

Being yourself is an art; learning to be yourself is the work of a lifetime. Looking at the world of marketing, you would have thought that being yourself was the easiest thing on earth: *Just do it; Because you’re worth it.* Set me free from the pressures and constraints of life, the adverts imply, and all will be well, my true self will flourish.

But being yourself doesn’t just happen. It’s something we have to work at. The self isn’t some inner core – an untouched jewel at the heart of us that will at last be revealed when we escape from other people and their demands. Our true selves are what we discover in the very process of rubbing up alongside one another.

The story is told of an ill-fated early modern experiment to discover the natural human language. At birth, a baby was isolated from speech. Fed and tended, but never spoken to, the child was treated as a scientific specimen and observed to see what language would occur to it naturally. But at the age when its contemporaries were making their first stammerings towards speech, the child didn’t come up with a language of its own. Instead it remained silent, became ill, lost the will to live. The child died because it was *incommunicado*, quarantined from communication. Because it had nothing to respond to, nothing to rub up against, it had no sense of itself or of its relation to other people, and therefore no sense of the value or purpose of its existence.

Learning to be oneself is one of the key demands that are laid upon us in this season of Lent. Of course it seems counter-intuitive to say this: *being yourself* has about it the air of selfishness, whereas Lent is rightly seen as a season of self-*denial*. Listen, though, to the wonderful words of the Lenten preface to the eucharistic prayer that will be offered shortly here and in churches across the country:
...in these forty days you [O God] lead us into the desert of repentance
that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline
we may grow in grace
and learn to be your people once again.

Here we’re reminded that Lent isn’t a season of self-denial for its own sake - though in our culture of overabundant consumption, that wouldn’t be altogether a bad thing. Lent is a time to practise the serious and difficult art of learning who we are: God’s people, made in God’s image, blessed with God’s grace, but tempted always to rely on ourselves.

And the prayer goes on:

Through fasting, prayer and acts of service
you bring us back to your generous heart.

Through study of your holy word
you open our eyes to your presence in the world
and free our hands to welcome others
into the radiant splendour of your love.

So the first lesson in the Lenten art of being yourself is the lesson of relationship. Being myself is inseparable from other people being themselves: finding our place as part of the whole human family, a family sustained in being by God, whose heart is generous and whose love is radiant in its splendour. And as we do this, we learn what you might call the gift of true humanity, which Saint Paul calls our citizenship in the household of God: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2:19)

In today’s second lesson we encountered an instance of how to behave in this household of God. The scribes come to Jesus, dragging with them a woman caught in adultery. They make her stand in front of him, saying: ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In the law of Moses it is commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ These are men sure of their ground. They know they have a clear cut case: the crime, the law and the punishment are all unequivocal; and Jesus, if he is a true teacher, cannot but agree with them.
But, as so often in the gospels, it is when those who come to Jesus are most certain of their case that he finds them most mistaken. Jesus begins to write with his finger on the ground. Writing on the firm ground of their certainty, he questions them as they have questioned him. We do not know what he is writing. It may be nothing more than a ruse to buy him time in the debate. But, if it is a ruse, it works: ‘let anyone among you who is without sin’, he says, ‘be the first to throw the stone at her’. And in a graphic scene, slowly the truth begins to sink in. One by one the accusers leave, recognising perhaps that their zeal against this openly sinful woman is motivated at least in part by guilt for the hidden sins that they (and all of us) have committed.

In the household of God, then, we all share in the duty of helping each other to become ourselves. And we do so not by accusing, but by recognising our common human fallibility. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, said Jesus; not ‘hate your neighbour as you hate the sins you’ve managed to conceal from others’. The process is one of mutual stewardship: seeing our own sins more clearly in the sins of others; and, more positively, learning to grow in faith and love through the faith and love we recognise in others.

Now of course the sin I’ve been talking about is personal sin – the wrongdoing that we inflict on each other at an individual level. But sin is original – structural and social – as well as personal. We cannot avoid our complicity in the evil around us and this season of Lent is a time for renewed prayer and action to reform our world as well as our selves. To help the world become more truly itself in God, even as we become more truly ourselves in Christ. Or, as the eucharistic preface puts it: ‘to open our eyes to [God’s] presence in the world and free our hands to welcome others into the radiant splendour of [God’s] love’.

Being yourself doesn’t just happen, it’s something that you have to work at. And in the same way, God’s love doesn’t just happen to us, it’s a reality in which we have to stake our claim. God’s forgiveness is real. But, besides being forgiven, we and our world are also called to reform, to break out of our addiction to sin. The Dominican friar, Herbert McCabe, put it, rather sharply, like this:

Christ did not die for us instead of us. He died to make it possible for us to die and rise again in him. And this is hard.

This is what Lent is for.
It reminds us that we come through death to life, through *denial of our self* to our *true selves*. And it helps us to start the process – so that we may be ready for the final Easter when we rise in glory and freedom to live for eternity - in the [radiant splendour of the] love of God.

*(God Still Matters, p.225)*