

# Parish of Central Exeter

2nd Sunday of Lent

27<sup>th</sup> February 2021

## Lenten Journeys

Welcome everyone.

*Our reflections this morning are by Sheila and this evening by Richard. Intercessions are from Caroline. Many thanks to you all.*



*Welcome to the penitential purple of Lent.*

*We continue a Lenten journey theme, and this morning we are introduced to the realisation that it will lead to the Cross. This evening Richard will return us to the wilderness – where it's no safer!*

### Call to Worship

We come to worship this morning in different places.

O God, do not be far from us.

We come to worship this morning for different reasons.

O God, do not be far from us.

We experience the presence of the Spirit in different ways.

O God, do not be far from us.

We hear Jesus' words with different ears.

O God, do not be far from us.

"Deny yourselves."

O God, do not be far from us.

"Take up your cross."

O God, do not be far from us.

"Follow me."

O God,

we thank you for drawing near to us

wherever we are

in this place,

in our lives.

Amen.

*(written by Joanna Harader, and posted on Spacious Faith. <http://spaciousfaith.com/>)*

## Gathering Hymn

'New every morning is the Love', sung by the choir of Sheffield Cathedral. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPZn-4ZyGJI>

## Confession

Gracious God, we confess to you:

**We want to be followers of Jesus,**

**but we do not always want to follow Jesus.**

**We don't even want to listen**

**when the conversation turns toward darkness and death.**

**We prefer to indulge ourselves.**

**We are eager to put down our crosses.**

**We cling tightly to our lives.**

**We grasp at worldly rewards.**

Holy and loving God,  
forgive all of our thoughts and actions  
that would protect us from the path of Christ.

*(written by Joanna Harader, and posted on Spacious Faith. <http://spaciousfaith.com/>)*

## Collect for the second Sunday in Lent

Almighty God,  
by the prayer and discipline of Lent  
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,  
and by following in his Way  
come to share in his glory;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Readings

New Testament Reading      Romans 4:13-25    NIV

### Abraham justified by faith

<sup>13</sup> It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

<sup>18</sup> Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” <sup>19</sup> Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup> Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” <sup>23</sup> The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, <sup>24</sup> but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. <sup>25</sup> He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.



Abraham and Sarah  
Marc Chagall 1956

### **Worship song**

‘The God of Abraham Praise,’ a new version although the tune is the familiar one. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWjPTXtCAHE>

### **Gospel Reading Mark 8: 31-38 NIV**

#### **Jesus Predicts His Death**

<sup>31</sup> He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

<sup>33</sup> But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

## The Way of the Cross

<sup>34</sup> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. <sup>36</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? <sup>37</sup> Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? <sup>38</sup> If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

### Reflection

I sympathise with Peter today as I am sure I would not have understood that the one the Jews had been waiting for, the Messiah, was going to be rejected by the religious leaders and be killed. We have moved to the middle section of Mark's gospel. The turning point has begun a few verses earlier with the gradual healing of a blind man before Jesus takes the disciples to Caesarea Philippi. Here he questions them about his identity 'Who do people say that I am?' and Peter declares that he is the Messiah – the anointed one, the Christ. Jesus makes no response to that comment except to forbid them to tell anyone.

Instead using his preferred self-description 'Son of Man' he proceeds to teach about rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. This is not what the disciples expected since they hoped the Messiah would bring freedom from the Romans, probably by violence. I understand how Peter would want to prevent such a fate for his friend. Jesus' fierce reply to Peter, calling him 'Satan' shows us how he recognises temptation directed at him in the words of his friend. We see that this is one 'opportune time' for evil to attempt to deflect Jesus from his understanding of what God, his Father, was asking him to do. He perceives that Peter is responding as a human, while he is seeking to give new meaning to his role through his meditation on the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. Though it may have been hard for Jesus to be so critical of Peter, the rejection of this temptation strengthened his resolve to walk a different, non-violent, path that would lead to his passion.

Mark continues with teaching that Jesus gives to the crowd as well as to the disciples about the cost of following him. He talks about denial and taking up a cross. At that time, the Romans forced condemned men to carry their cross to the crucifixion site. This is about losing freedom or control of one's life, being forced to carry your own cross to death. Jesus says that following him is not a pleasure-seeking trip for a few weeks or months but a life choice of service. Yet such service is not drudgery but true fulfilment for it is one of receiving God's love and sharing that love.

For those of us who have been Christians for many years, and for whom choices of career were made decades ago, it may be hard to think, what more could denial and taking up a cross mean for me today? I found the words of Bruce Prewer's *Affirmation of Faith* helpful. (We met this last week and again this morning.)

First through the idea that when Jesus calls us to follow him, he enables us to truly become children of God – to know that we are loved. Then that through the Spirit if we obey the call

to follow him, we find freedom and are led to 'humble service'. Such humble service may be done in secret as Jesus encouraged his followers in Matthew 6 – that their giving, prayer or fasting is not done for show. So, our denial may be in the form of more giving to charity or our time in voluntary service or prayer. This is not done to earn rewards but in gratitude for the love we have received.



I was struck by the definition of humility in the introduction to Stephen Cherry's 'Barefoot Prayers', published in 2013, with daily meditations for Lent and Easter. He uses the metaphor of being barefoot to emphasise 'the down-to-earth *humanness* of our spirituality.....being as real as we can.' (p10) This is so important that we do not try to pretend with God, that we recognise our limitations, our mixed-up motives, and desires. He stresses the importance of humility as the foundation for Christian spirituality, wisdom and ministry.

'True humility is found midway on the spectrum that begins in self-loathing and ends in arrogance. It is self-acceptance without self-obsession, self-awareness without self-regard. It is no friend of either self-congratulation or self-pity. Humility is a calm and calming virtue.' (p7)

As with so much in the Christian life finding the balance is the challenge. Jesus's words are demanding and perhaps I tend to look for the easy solution. I close with this prayer from India.

Servant Christ, help us to follow you into the desert,  
with you to fast, denying false luxury,  
refusing the tempting ways of self-indulgence,  
the way of success at all costs,  
the way of coercive persuasion.  
Servant Christ, help us to follow you.

*(India, Liturgy of the Disciples of Christ the Servant)*

### **Prayer**

Gracious God,  
when we catch sight of the totality of your claim on our lives;  
our believing wavers.

When we hear the absurdity of your unbreakable covenant with us;  
like Sarai and Abram, we laugh.

When we face the foolish wisdom of the looming cross;  
like Peter, we suggest an alternative.

Meet us in our disbelieving, loving God,  
move us gently into the deep waters of faith.

*(written by Katherine Hawker, and posted on her Liturgies Outside website.)*

### **Affirmation of Faith**

I believe in an innovative God,  
who does not wait for us to find ourselves  
but comes seeking the lost and calling us into a new way.

I believe in Jesus of Nazareth as God's crucial initiative,  
that when he calls us to follow, Christ also gives us the power  
to become, both in creed and deed, the children of the living God.

I believe in the Spirit by whom Jesus still comes to us,  
calling us to follow him into an obedience which is true liberty  
and to a humble service which is the fruit of holy friendship.

I believe in the church as the fellowship of Christ's people,  
called to respect and support one another through joys and tribulations  
as we travel the road towards the "promised land" of God's future.  
*(Bruce Prewer)*

### **Intercessions for a Lenten journey**

Loving God, on our journey through Lent we call on you in prayer for the courage and  
wisdom to turn our good intentions into some sort of reality in action.

We join with Christians everywhere to ask for a deeper understanding of the scriptures that  
we may serve God and our neighbours through the churches we have created, whether they  
be great cathedrals, village churches or house groups. In these restricted times we are  
thankful for the new and different ways which bring us together.

Often unable to be in those buildings or in close to each other, we give thanks for the  
technology being used in inventive ways to unite us. We may long to meet up together for  
worship, but we are finding new ways to reach out and learn valuable possibilities for  
sharing. We pray that this will only increase the knowledge of your love and lead to both  
greater awareness, and tolerance between those who seek for divine truth.

Lord on our journey..... Show us the way

Almighty God, in your covenant with Abraham you made a promise of continuing prosperity and well-being in your wonderfully created world. As custodians of that Creation, we know there is an urgent need to change the ways in which we use your gift of natural resources.

As we begin to see signs heralding the Spring, in fragile iris and cheerful primrose, we give thanks. But we also bear witness to the ravages which humankind is causing in many lands and know that the sin of greed is largely the cause. In recognising that we also have a responsibility for all that is happening in our world, we must pray for ourselves.

Lord we need and ask for your guidance to see how we can restore the equilibrium of your Creation through seeking better ways to live. Help us play our part in fighting for social justice, equal shares in the bounty of your promise that we may restore our planet to health and beauty.

Lord on our journey ..... show us the way

Lord Jesus you taught your disciples that you would have to suffer before your full glory would be revealed. We are familiar with suffering and it has been brought home to us during this past year. Sometimes that has been hard to bear. We hold up to you all those in need whether physically, mentally or spiritually.

Grant us grace to help wherever we can to sustain those suffering and to do that in your Name. We see all around the kindness of strangers, the stoic endurance of medical staff, and the willingness of a multitude of volunteers and charitable workers. Bless all who struggle to do your will in the face of suffering.

Lord on our journey ..... show us the way

Finally Lord we offer you our thankfulness for families and friends who have supported us throughout our lives, those who have given us examples to follow and are no longer with us. We remember them with gratitude and love. Now, in a moment of quiet we recall them, especially those who we have lost during this past year.....

As those who shaped and influenced us are brought to mind, we pray that we may dedicate ourselves to carry on the baton of a life of faith, and be ready to hand it on in the hope of joining those loved ones in your eternal kingdom.

Merciful Father accept these prayers and give us your grace to continue the journey.  
Amen.

## The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

## A short Spiritual Communion

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.



Lord, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Lord, have mercy.

O God,  
help me to trust you,  
help me to know that you are with me,  
help me to believe that nothing  
can separate me from your love  
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## An offertory prayer

*We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.*

Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,  
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.  
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,  
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,  
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

*As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to the Choir of the Benedictine Abbey of Keur Moussa, Senegal, singing Psalm 91: 'Quand renaît le matin.' They are accompanied with traditional Senegalese instruments and the monastery is famous for making them.*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Orl9apaF\\_Q&feature=emb\\_rel\\_end](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Orl9apaF_Q&feature=emb_rel_end)

*It's quite a haunting tune!*



*Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ. I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and make it a sacramental moment.*

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits you have given me,  
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.  
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,  
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.  
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,  
may I know you more clearly,  
love you more dearly,  
and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen.

### **Post Communion Collect**

Lord God,  
you have renewed us with the living bread from heaven;  
by it you nourish our faith,  
increase our hope,  
and strengthen our love:  
teach us always to hunger for him who is the true and living bread,  
and enable us to live by every word  
that proceeds from out of your mouth;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **Commission & Benediction**

God's promises endure from generation to generation.  
May the God of Abraham and Sarah,  
the God who sent Jesus to redeem us,  
the God whose covenant is eternal,  
bless you and make you fruitful.

*(adapted from The Abingdon Worship Annual 2006, and posted on the Worship Elements page of the Ministry Matters website.)*

### **Closing Music**

Sheila had asked for 'When God Almighty came to Earth' (722 in our Hymn book), but I could not find a Youtube version. However this is another hymn by John Bell of the Iona Community which you may not know and is worth listening to. 'Heaven cannot wait.'  
Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHMt3YJHbZE>

'Jesus is Lord  
In our present imperfection.'



**Scroll down for Coffee Break**

## Coffee Break

### Confronting demons

As part of collecting possible material to illustrate Richard's reflections in our Night Prayer, I searched for images by typing into Google 'Confronting our inner demons'. Google replied instantly with: 'Do you mean *your* inner demons?' Ouch! Artificial intelligence or Divine challenge?

This is a story I found as part of this confrontation!

A story from the desert fathers illustrates that even in the desert there is no escaping your own habitual responses:

"A brother was restless in the community and often moved to anger. So he said: 'I will go and live somewhere by myself. And since I shall be able to talk or listen to no one, I shall be tranquil, and my passionate anger will cease.'

He went out and lived alone in a cave. But one day he filled his jug with water and put it on the ground. It happened suddenly to fall over. He filled it again, and again it fell. And this happened a third time. And in a rage he snatched up the jug and broke it.

Returning to his right mind, he knew that the demon of anger had mocked him, and he said: 'Here am I by myself, and he has beaten me. I will return to the community. Wherever you live, you need effort and patience and above all God's help.' And he rose up, and went back."

In 'The Solace of Fierce Landscapes' (1998) Belden Lane writes: "The desert monks were hardly naïve despisers of culture. What they fled with greatest fear was not the external world, but the world they carried inside themselves: an ego-centeredness needing constant approval, driven by compulsive behaviour, frantic in its effort to attend to a self-image that always required mending.' Ironically, in the fleeing they ran smack dab into the very thing they sought to avoid.



**Scroll down for Night Prayer**

# Night Prayer

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent  
28<sup>th</sup> February 2021

## In the Wilderness



This is the second of three reflections on the theme of Jesus in the wilderness. Last week I drew upon Denis Potter's play *The Son of Man*. Today I draw upon Harry Williams' *True Wilderness*.

### Preparation

i just realized  
that in my imagination  
the wilderness is always somewhere else;  
a foreign landscape i actively have to enter  
in the act of being faithful.

truthfully,  
the wilderness is always where i am  
right now  
and faith is the courage to stay with it  
when i'd rather pretend i am  
anywhere else.

*(written by Cheryl Lawrie and posted on hold this space.)*

### Song

This is 'The Wilderness' by The Isaacs. Although its starting point is the wilderness of the Exodus towards the Promised Land, it can be applied to this evening's theme too.

'But God won't lead you  
where He won't keep you  
He'll be with you  
in the wilderness.'

Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tRb1-g1xKA>

### **Prayer for Lent:**

Once we stood by the clear waters,  
knowing who we were,  
who the church was and where we were going....  
...now we're in the desert....  
...uncharted territory.  
...severe and bleak.  
...but full of possibilities.  
...the rules are different.  
The old ways don't work.  
...it is a lonely place,  
and dangerous.  
There are snakes and scorpions.  
Alien creatures.  
we have been stripped of our illusions  
of growth...  
of plenty...  
and we are in the desert.  
waiting...  
for God to speak.

Jesus Help us.  
Its hard to find the energy. When the sand pushes against us.  
When we stumble in the wilderness. When we can't see the way.  
When the old signposts have disappeared  
And all we have are sand-dunes.  
But we know...  
We can't do a quick-fix  
We can't give up  
We can't leave it to someone else.

Good news came from out of the desert.  
There is good news.  
God has brought us here to hear it.  
And God will lead us to a land of promise.

**Amen.**

### **Reading Mark 1:12-13** (King James' Version)

(following Jesus' baptism by John, at which 'there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased':)

And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.

### **Harry Williams' 'True Wilderness'**

Harry Williams was a priest, academic, theologian and, in the second half of his life, a member of the Community of the Resurrection. When Dean of Trinity College, he delivered many sermons to Cambridge undergraduates, several of which were published in the book *True Wilderness*. In the title piece, he reflects on Christ in the wilderness, drawing in particular on the psychological insights he had gained during his experience of psychotherapy lasting many years.

Here are some selected highlights of his sermon:

- 1) "Lent is supposed to be the time when we think of Jesus in the wilderness. And the wilderness belongs to us. It is always lurking somewhere as part of our experience, and there are times when it seems pretty near the whole of it."
- 2) "Most people's wilderness is inside them, not outside. Thinking of it as outside is generally a trick we play upon ourselves — a trick to hide from us what we really are, not comfortingly wicked, but incapable, for the time being, of establishing communion. Our wilderness, then, is an inner isolation. It's an absence of contact. It's a sense of being alone — boringly alone, or saddeningly alone, or terrifyingly alone. Often we try to relieve it... by chatter, or gin, or religion, or sex, or possibly a combination of all four..."
- 3) "It is by the Spirit that Jesus is driven into the wilderness, the same Spirit which had brought him the conviction of being called to do great things.... The story of Jesus reminds us that being thrown out in this way must be an inevitable concomitant of our call to God's service."
- 4) "We are tempted to give up, to despair. Tempted to cynicism. Tempted sometimes to cruelty. Tempted not to help others when we know we can because, we think, what's the use?.... And behind each and all of these temptations is the temptation to disbelieve in what we are, the temptation to distrust ourselves, to deny that it is the Spirit himself which bears witness with our spirit. God in us."

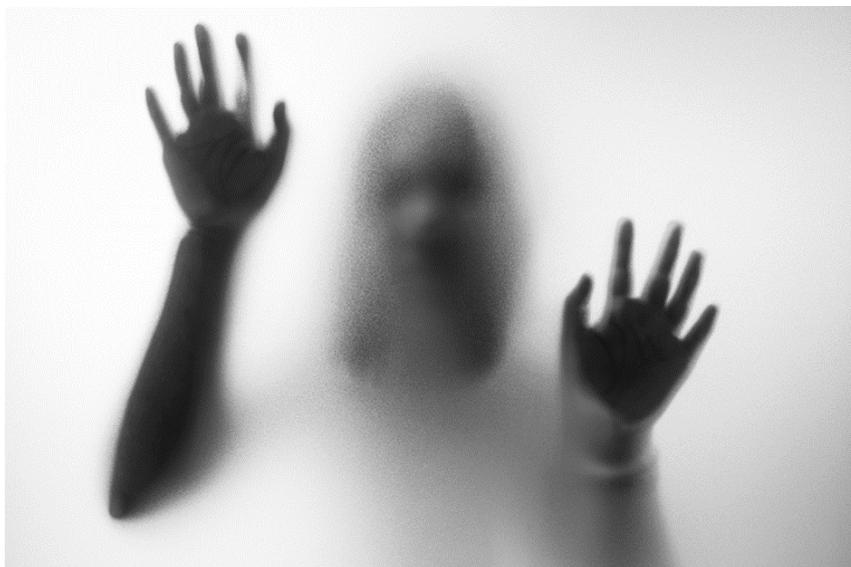
Harry Williams will not let us forget that when we are reading of Jesus in the wilderness, either in Mark's very brief account above or in the expanded versions we find in Matthew and Luke, we are also reading about what can take place in our own inner life (perhaps, but not necessarily, triggered by external events) — periods when we find ourselves wrestling

with (or being wrestled by) doubts, difficulties and disasters. Humankind, as the writer of the book of Job puts it, is born to trouble as surely as the sparks fly upwards.

There are those whose inner wilderness feels to them vast, packed with challenges and innumerable 'wild beasts', and whose sojourn there continues way beyond an easily countable forty days; for others, wilderness experiences are more in the nature of short, sharp shocks, disabling for a period and then (often for no discernible reason) fading in intensity as 'normal' life reasserts itself... until the next short, sharp shock, of course. Either way, as Williams learned through his own hard experience, the inner wilderness is an aspect of what being human involves.

That sounds gloomy, negative and fatalistic — yet, as Williams picks up on, Jesus was 'driven' into his wilderness by the Spirit. It wasn't Satan (however you understand that very ambiguous term) who drove Jesus into the wilderness, or led him there or lured him there, but God himself. What Williams doesn't say, but is worth recalling, is that in the early centuries of Christianity the wilderness or desert came to be understood as a prime place where *God* could be encountered, giving rise to the phenomenon of the 'Desert Fathers and Mothers' — the early hermits, ascetics and monks who lived mainly in the Egyptian desert. Jesus may have encountered 'Satan' in the wilderness, but it doesn't follow that God was absent. God, creator and sustainer of all that is, could hardly be absent from the wilderness which is part of his creation.

We should not lose sight of the fact that wilderness, whether internal or external, is the place of encounter. When we find that we have been driven into the wilderness, may we remain aware that that does not entail being simultaneously driven out of God's presence. He remains present — lurking close at hand, among the stones and the wild beasts.



## **We Pray**

We will wait for you, O God.  
Your Spirit compels us  
to go into the wilderness,  
and we ask for the courage to examine  
the desert places in our hearts,  
and to be willing to  
face the adversaries in our lives—  
that which lures us away  
from being who you have created us to be.

We pray for the courage to face our wild beasts and fears.  
Relieve the troubles of our hearts,  
and the devastation of our distress.  
Turn your love towards us  
that we may we know your grace in our loneliness and afflictions.

We pray this prayer,  
knowing that you watch over us, and deliver us.  
We wait for you, O God.  
In the name of our brother Jesus we pray,  
Amen.

*(excerpted from a longer prayer by Rev Karla. Posted on RevGalBlogPals )*

## **Closing Prayer**

### **Blessing**

The love of the faithful Creator  
The peace of the wounded Healer  
The joy of the challenging Spirit  
The hope of the three in One  
Surround and encourage you  
Today, tonight and for ever.

*(Kathy Galloway)*

### **Closing music**

We are closing today with 'In my Life', a track from the Beatles' 1965 album 'Rubber Soul'.  
A reflection on past events shaping our lives. Words (by John Lennon, who was well aware  
of his inner demons), are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q98dPSa-tdk>

## "In My Life"

There are places I'll remember  
All my life though some have changed  
Some forever not for better  
Some have gone and some remain

All these places had their moments  
With lovers and friends I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life I've loved them all

But of all these friends and lovers  
There is no one compares with you  
And these memories lose their meaning  
When I think of love as something new

Though I know I'll never lose affection  
For people and things that went before  
I know I'll often stop and think about them  
In my life I love you more

### **Thanks**

*Thanks to everyone who has participated, especially to Sheila and Richard for their reflections. Material taken or adapted from other websites has an attribution made where possible.*

