From Shaping Spirit to Living Power:  
A Coleridgean Theology of Imagination  
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In this lecture I would like to take us from Coleridge’s famous phrase ‘My shaping spirit of imagination’, a phrase he uses in *Dejection An Ode*, through to the fuller implications, the more systematic development of what he has to say about the imagination, when in the 13th Chapter of the *Biographia Literaria* he calls it, not just ‘a shaping spirit’, but ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human perception’ and goes on to give it a theological grounding as ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’.\(^1\)

However, if we are to understand these developments we can’t quite start with *Dejection: An Ode*, for if we are to understand that poem we must hold it in ‘polar tension’ (as Coleridge would say) with the earlier poem it seems to contradict—that is *Frost at Midnight*.

In a vital passage in *Frost at Midnight*, Coleridge moves from the memory of himself as a child on the roof of Christ’s Hospital watching the stars, to thinking of how his own child might be brought up:

> But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
> By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
> Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
> Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
> And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
> The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
> Of that eternal language, which thy God  
> Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
> Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
> Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
> Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (54-64)

In this passage, Coleridge approaches the heart of what he has to say in his poem. He prepares our mind for the notion that the beauties and particularities of nature might be themselves and yet be more than themselves, by beginning first at the level of analogy. He compares the wanderings of his boy as he grows up to a wandering breeze. Then he introduces the word ‘image’, which he uses, not its usual sense as a noun but in a new sense, as a verb, and he suggests that one part of nature *images* another part of nature, like ‘by lakes and sandy shores, beneath the clouds /Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores /And mountain crags’. Here, the cloud-mountains correspond to the physical mountains, which in turn of course, are reflected in the lakes. All

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these examples of one thing imaging and referring to another, prepare the imagination to receive the more explicit teaching, that nature herself may be imaging that which is beyond nature. That she may be not only a distinct series of opaque objects, but also a language of symbols.

The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters …

This is one of Coleridge’s most important insights. He never ceased to be amazed by the fact that nature is intelligible, by the fact that we not only perceive it in a coherent and ordered way, but that its very coherence and order provides us with a vocabulary of symbols with which to explore a similar coherence and order both within ourselves, and beyond or through the veil of nature. Throughout his life, he tried to build a coherent system of thought on the foundation of this insight. In this system, the analogy of language is crucial. In his later prose he works out the foundations and structure of such a system in a rigorous and rational way. But in one sense, the heart of it had already been disclosed to him intuitively in this poem. As often happens, imagination was the forerunner of reason. In this poem, he expresses the intuition that the world in which we find ourselves, and all its contents, these lakes, these mountains, these shining stars, are themselves words, within an eternal language which God utters. And what is taught in that language is not the accumulation of observations and statistics which passes for science, nor is it the tabulation of dry surfaces evoked, for example, in Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, (‘the world is everything which is the case’) but rather the language of the cosmos, rightly heard, teaches, or perhaps reaches towards the speaker of that language: the One ‘who from eternity doth teach /Himself in all, and all things in himself. /Great universal Teacher!’ In ‘Frost at Midnight’, the intelligibility of nature seems unproblematic and in every sense natural, and the flow of meaning is in one direction, unimpeded, from God, through the phenomena, the appearances of nature, to the open soul of the child.

Now, by way of apparent contrast, let us look at what Coleridge is saying, only four years later, as he himself gazes, in dejection, at those same ‘lovely shapes and sounds’:

And still I gaze – and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimm’d, but always seen;
Yon crescent Moon as fix’d as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel how beautiful they are!’
[...] It were a vain endeavor,
Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within. (PW 293)

Now the flow is reversed. He can no longer sense the meaning of the lovely shapes and sounds, flowing in to him from ‘out there’ from God’s ‘utterence’ of Nature, and yet he knows that there could be a flow from within, but it is blocked and stifled.

At the heart of *Dejection: An Ode* is the struggle to know whether the transfiguring glimpses in nature which he had so powerfully celebrated in *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison* and *Frost at Midnight* were really there, or whether they were just projections of his feelings. If there is a range or spectrum between an utterly confident transcendental vision in which all things speak of God and are drenched in his meaning, on the one hand, and on the other a bleak matter of fact-ness in which everything is opaque, dully and merely itself, speaking of nothing beyond its own materiality, then *Frost at Midnight* is at one end, the northern pole of that spectrum, but in *Dejection: an Ode* Coleridge has been plunged far south to the other pole, and the contrast and challenge between the two ways of seeing nature are an agony to Coleridge.

In the second stanza of the published poem he speaks of

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh or tear—

In such a state gazing at the western sky Coleridge becomes aware of a complete disjunction between sight and feeling: even though he can describe what he sees precisely and beautifully, there is no connection with anything within.

Then, in the fourth section, Coleridge suddenly sees that the glories that he had previously seen in nature had really issued out from himself:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth—
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element!

In the fifth stanza, Coleridge identifies ‘this fair luminous cloud’ with Joy: joy, which has been given by nature and is then returned to nature as we see her:

Joy, Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud—
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud—
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

Finally, Coleridge diagnoses the depth of his crisis: in losing joy he has also wounded in himself the spirit of imagination from which all his visionary poetry had actually flowed:

But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But o be still and patient, all I can;
And haphly by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural Man—
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my Soul.

Like his mariner, Coleridge is somehow only seeing things through the ‘dungeon-grate’ of his own afflictions.

The paradox is that this lament for the loss of his ‘shaping spirit of imagination’ is itself expressed in beautifully shaped poetry of great imaginative force. Even as he mourns at seeing without feeling he is enabling us both to see and to feel. On one reading, this poem appears to concede that everything we thought was actually glorious and beautiful in nature is merely a subjective feeling projected onto nature, and yet those very ‘subjective’ ideas are expressed in a beautifully made object: the poem itself, which is not fleeting but reliable and generative, always available to the reader. From henceforth, this apparent dichotomy and tension between the two poles of the subjective and the objective was to be the central preoccupation of Coleridge’s thinking. What he needed was to find some mediating power between these apparent
opposites that would not only reconcile them but would release the immense potential energies that each could bring out in the other. Like his mariner, he would find that resolution in a miraculous moonrise.

It is well known that as a result of the double crisis of opium addiction and his tragic and morally crucifying love for Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge resolved to go abroad and seek healing for a broken heart, freedom from the drug, and some kind of personal renewal. It is also well known that he did not achieve any of these things, but returned in some respects more broken and debilitated than he had been when he left. But nevertheless his Mediterranean exile was a time of hard thinking and profound intellectual development, and it was while he was facing his demons in Malta that he also began to have those first renewals of the visionary experience whose absence he had lamented in Dejection: An Ode, but this time the experiences had a much deeper intellectual and theological grounding and would eventually bear fruit in his mature theological writing.

Coleridge’s Malta notebooks record a series of impressions of moonrise and moonlight as he looked out from his lonely watchtower in the governor’s palace and one of these notebook entries records a very significant breakthrough, which was, I believe, as much a turning point for Coleridge, as the gracious moonrise had been for his Mariner. For here Coleridge discerned something in the moon’s transfiguring light that promised him, at last, the real link he so desperately needed between outer and inner, object and subject, nature and spirit, philosophy and faith. Coleridge recorded the core of his experience, and intuition, in a brief note:

In looking at objects of Nature, while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro’ the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking, a symbolic language for something within me that already and for ever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim awaking of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature! It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is Logos, the Creator [and the Evolver!]

(CN II 2546)

In some ways this notebook entry speaks directly into that space, that apparent gap and contradiction, between Frost at Midnight and Dejection: An Ode—the gap that had so much paralysed Coleridge. Both poems address our experience of an intuited meaning in the appearances nature, and puzzle over where that ‘meaning’ comes from. Frost at Midnight had suggested that the shapes and sounds of nature might themselves be a kind of language. In that poem, the phrase ‘eternal language’ tells us something about God, but doesn’t help us to understand his language. In this note, Coleridge is trying to grasp what it might mean to say that the language of God is a ‘symbolic’ language.

As we have seen, the most important of Coleridge’s many insights is just this parallel he discerned between our experience of language and our
experience of the world. We could describe language in purely exterior and physical terms. As soon as a word is used it has a quantifiable, ‘objective’ physical presence; black ink and paper weighing so many grams, an audible sound at so many decibels. Yet, however accurate the measurements and description of language as a purely physical phenomenon were to be, such a description would still say nothing of a speaker’s, listener’s, or reader’s actual experience of language. When we use language, we pass through the physicality of the words so swiftly we hardly realise they are there. For the words we use are, of course, not simply dead physical objects, opaque and referring to nothing but themselves. The words we use are living symbols taking us the instant they are uttered through and beyond themselves, connecting us with an intricate network of reference; reference to other words and reference to the realities in nature and in ourselves of which the words are symbols. For most of us this process of meeting the word only to be ushered through it to that meaning beyond itself, to which it points, is so familiar and unconscious we scarcely notice it is happening. We cease to be conscious of the words, only of the images or ideas they summon up. But poets are concerned not only with the meanings of words, but with savouring and celebrating the words themselves, the very sounds. And so it is that in reading great poetry, our vision is doubled: we become aware simultaneously both of the word as a thing in itself, a chosen sound, a kind of music in the air, and also of that other reality, that mystery of truth of which the word is the gatekeeper. In the language of poetry we meet something that is both itself and a mediator of that which is beyond itself. We can sometimes have the same experience, not just with words but with the world. Before the Enlightenment most people were free to read the world as being itself symbolic and constantly drawing us to truths beyond itself. For Coleridge this experience was so constant that it drove him first to doubt and then to demolish the new ‘Enlightened’ view that the world was a set of dead objects meaning nothing.

In his rich, dense, closely written note, trying to unravel what this particular moonrise meant, as a word, a logos, Coleridge begins, apparently, in a world clearly divided between subject and object, which he inherited in the eighteenth century. That phrase, ‘in looking at objects of nature’, could have been written by any materialist or mechanistic philosopher of Coleridge’s day. But the sentence continues, ‘while I am thinking’—and this touches on what he had observed with increasing frequency in his letters and notebooks, that the mind in its act of perception is not passive. We are not merely tabula rasa, upon which the outside objects of nature impinge or impress themselves, on the contrary we are constantly active looking, thinking, shaping minds, and surely this constant awareness of our own conscious activity, of the movement of what Coleridge called ‘the self-circling energies of the reason’ (LS 29), must itself have an influence both on the way in which we see nature, and perhaps on the very nature itself that we see. So Coleridge continues: ‘In looking at objects of nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking
From Shaping Spirit to Living Power

From Shaping Spirit to Living Power (CN II 2546). We move here from the ideas and language about mind as being passive, to the notion that the mind is actively asking, actively seeking. And what the mind seeks is not simply the exterior recording of the opaque outsides of dead objects, but language, intelligibility, meaning: ‘I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for a symbolic language’. Coleridge has the experience as he sees the moon dim-glimmering through the window-pane, that, as it were, there is a meaning behind it, that it is like a word, that he could pass through it and see something beyond it; but he simultaneously has the experience that whatever is beyond it is also resonant with something which is within him, something which ‘already and for ever exists’. It is as though the experience of perception were a kind of medium or middle-state between a meaning that is beyond and a meaning that is within. Perception itself becomes a language of communication between the inner and the outer, between the immanent and the transcendent.

So Coleridge continues in this startling little note, and this time he introduces the word, Word, significantly with a capital W: ‘It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol!’ Now, whose Word, whose Symbol is it? Coleridge in this note is certainly not suggesting, as Dejection An Ode might have implied, that it is simply his own construct. Yes, this moonlight does seem somehow to correspond with something within Coleridge’s inner nature, which only that moonlight could express; but Coleridge is not saying that it is he, privately, Coleridge himself, who is, as it were, casting upon the moonlight the spell of its meaning, which is what Dejection: An Ode, read on its own, might seem to suggest.

‘It is still interesting’, he says, ‘as a Word, a symbol’, but he goes on to say, in a sudden leap of understanding, ‘It is Logos, the Creator! and the Evolver!’ And here he anticipates by some years the formulation that he gives this idea in the famous thirteenth chapter of the Biographia Literaria, where he asks at last, ‘What is the deepest and purest source of creativity, of imagination?’ Is there a common source both for the outward and visible forms of nature, and for those inward and invisible imaginative apprehensions of that nature which we find in the human mind, a common source for both object and subject? Is there a common source for that beautifully expressed and ordered organic whole, that composition of one in many parts which we call the cosmos, and the beautifully expressed and ordered organic wholes in poetry and art which we call human creation? Might there be a single source for that ordering and imaginative power which is responsible for both? Coleridge anticipates and says, ‘It is Logos, the Creator! and the Evolver!’

The question naturally arises: does this Word, this Logos, have anything to do with Christ, the Christ whom we encounter in the preface to John’s Gospel, where it says: ‘In the Beginning was the Word? In John it is the Word through whom all things are made, but who is also the ‘light that lightens every man that comes into the world’. Coleridge, in beginning to answer that question, was feeling his way towards something important here, important for him and perhaps also for us. The
word ‘Logos’ could mean many things. Primarily it meant ‘Word’, but by extension it meant order, coherence, intelligibility, and that is how it was used by Greek philosophers long before it was taken up by the writer of John’s Gospel and identified with Christ, the ‘eternal Word’, the only begotten of the Father. In the word Logos Coleridge had found a focal point that brought together his deep sense, explored in his earlier poetry, that all the images of nature meant, or were saying something, and his equally deep need to make some new sense of the religion of his childhood, the faith of his own father, his inheritance as a Christian. Perhaps there was a link: perhaps we find in the world around us so many apt representations and symbols of our own inner states and experiences because the outer and the inner have the same source and are sustained and given their meaning by the same divine Word. Perhaps he could find, in a new understanding of Christ as Logos, a way of reconciling his insights as a poet with the faith into which he had been born. This is the breakthrough, implicit in this note!

How that correspondence works between Christ the eternal Word and Christ the light within us, how it might renew our understanding of who we are, as persons made in his image, and how all of that might inform and encourage the life of the imagination – all this was to be the great work of the second half of Coleridge’s life when, like his mariner, he turned his sails for home. But in one sense it was all given and disclosed here as the April moonrise shone on a desperate and lonely man.

Coleridge hung on to these insights through all the struggles that ensued on his return to England, through the final break-down and crisis in the Greyhound Inn in December of 1813, and as he gradually recovered and was able to shape his insights and experience into what became the Biographia Literaria, he was at last in a position to resolve the tensions which the contrast between Frost at Midnight and Dejection an Ode had exposed. So let us turn now to the Biographia and to the passage from which I have taken the words ‘Living Power’, the other key phrase in my title.

The key to the whole book is the thirteenth chapter ‘On the Imagination’, and its core is this definition:

The imagination then, I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation”. (BL I 304-5)

Here, the intimation which Coleridge had in the notebook of 1805, that the phenomena of nature might form a symbolic language, and that the words of this language might both articulate hidden truths about our inner nature and point to God the Creator as Logos, is made explicit and grounded in a
philosophical system.

It is vital that we understand what it means for Coleridge to call the Imagination a ‘living power’ and an ‘agent’. Throughout the first part of the *Biographia*, and indeed throughout the first part of his life, he battled with, and in the end defeated, a system of thought in which not only the imagination and all perception, but mind itself was understood as a ‘passive faculty’ rather than a living power, a patient, not an agent. It was a view of the world that saw the mind as at best passively recording material phenomena, and at worst as merely a mirage, the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms in a mechanical universe. Coleridge saw the falsehood at the bottom of this view, and this new definition of Imagination is a kind of cry of triumph in winning that victory. He understood that from Descartes onwards to Newton, we had simply been beginning from the wrong end of things; as he put it in the letter to Thomas Poole:

Newton was a mere materialist – *Mind* in his system is always passive – a lazy Looker-on on an external World. If the mind be not passive, if it be indeed made in God’s Image, & that too in the sublimest sense – the Image of the *Creator* – there is ground for suspicion, that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false, as a system.

(CL II 709)

The Cartesian–Newtonian system, for all its immediate lucidity, ultimately made for a universe devoid of mind and intrinsically unintelligible, and made mind itself almost an absurdity, and something which was to be experienced in isolation, individually, and only ever on the inside of one’s small part of a cosmos which otherwise consisted of nothing but the meaningless concatenation of atoms. Coleridge was now in a position to see things from an entirely different perspective; he was no longer obliged to confine his sense of mind, intelligence, joy or wonder within the circle of the human skull, but could find it radiating through all the phenomena of the cosmos.

For Coleridge, the physical universe, which is the supposed ‘object’ of our perception, is not something that merely strikes us from the outside, but something that is, as it were, being formed continuously, both from our side of it by our perceiving Imaginations, and from an apprehended but as yet unknowable other side beyond it. The insight of this chapter is that there is a deep connection between that which is below the level of our consciousness and is continually giving us the gift of ourselves and our mind, and that which is behind or beyond the *phenomena* and is continuously giving them their being, allowing them to well up from its own *inexhaustible* depths. Even so seemingly simple a thing as perception itself, let alone composition or art, results from the active powers of our imagination, meeting and reflecting the active power of that Imagination which is always causing all things to be.

By means of our Primary Imagination, we are constantly participating in a cosmos whose every part is fraught with the meaning of the Mind of God. For
Coleridge, our Secondary Imagination (what we would now call poetic imagination, or the imagination of the artist) is of the same kind and comes from the same source as this Primary Imagination, and when we cooperate with it, it too produces and articulates eternal symbols. By contrast, the Fancy simply manufactures artificial equivalences that are not, in Coleridge’s terms, worthy of the name of ‘symbol’. They have, as he would put it, ‘mechanic form’ rather than ‘organic form’, because they are not rooted in the Mind which is the source of the organic wholeness of the cosmos, for that cosmos is God’s act of poesis.

Coleridge had been speculating in this direction for many years, but had drawn a very strict dividing line between philosophy and religion in general, let alone full-blooded Trinitarian Christianity in particular. But by the time he came to write the Biographia, he had indeed experienced ‘a more thorough revolution in my philosophic principles and a deeper revelation into my own heart’, and, ‘my final reconversion to the whole truth in Christ’;3 and so, here, he names the Mind and Imagination behind all things, in an allusion to God’s self-disclosure to Moses at the Burning Bush, ‘I AM that I AM’.

The second part of this sentence on the Primary Imagination is equally important; Coleridge calls it ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’. In other words, the human mind, far from being an epiphenomenon, a ‘ghost in the machine’, or a kind of mist thrown up by the mere movement of matter, is, in its entire imaginative perceiving, correspondent to something else beyond itself, and beyond the cosmos it inhabits. It is scarcely surprising that we find everywhere tantalising repetitions and echoes of ourselves in nature, that the mind is ‘everywhere echo or mirror, seeking of itself’, since our mind itself is a repetition, an echo, of the Mind of the Maker, in whose image we are created.

Because our Primary Imagination is a repetition in our finite mind of God’s eternal act of creation, it enables us so to read God’s works as to glimpse through them the Mind of their Maker. Unless, of course, we perversely choose to refuse that glimpse, refuse to hear ‘that eternal language’ which ‘God utters’, just as we might choose to describe our own language entirely in terms of its physicality and not in terms of its meaning.

So Coleridge asserts that the power and prime agent of all human perception is not a material mechanism leaving its mark on the passive mind, but, on the contrary, is a living power of imagination, ‘the repetition in our finite minds of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’. It is as though the creative Word that speaks the cosmos into being raises its echo in us, and echoes back to God from our minds, made in His image. Where our echo meshes with His Word, we perceive His world.

Certainly, if we are to understand the vision and power behind those many moments in Coleridge’s prose and poetry, not least in The Mariner itself, in which an account of natural beauty becomes a revelation of truth, then we will

reach that understanding by tracing both world and word back to their single source in the holy Logos, the Imagination of God.

Coleridge came at last to comprehend a unity and continuity between his reason and his faith, both of them welling up from and animated by imagination. In the last words of the *Biographia*, he seems to revisit that evening walk as a little boy, holding his father’s hands while the stars came out, but this time the grown man has found himself drawn into the life of another Father, with the Son, and Holy Spirit:

Christianity, as taught in the Liturgy and Homilies of our Church, though not discoverable by human Reason, is yet in accordance with it; that link follows link by necessary consequence; that Religion passes out of the ken of Reason only where the eye of Reason has reached its own Horizon; and that Faith is then but its continuation: even as the Day softens away into the sweet Twilight, and Twilight, hushed and breathless, steals into the Darkness. It is Night, sacred Night! The upraised Eye views only the starry Heaven which manifests itself alone: and the outward Beholding is fixed on the sparks twinkling in the awful depth, though Suns of other Worlds, only to preserve the Soul steady and collected in its pure *Act* of inward Adoration to the great I AM, and to the filial WORD that re-affirmeth it from Eternity to Eternity, whose choral Echo is the Universe”.

(BL II 247-8)

So, to conclude, Coleridge’s ‘shaping spirit of imagination’, that personal gift, that intuitive ability to sense and shape the organic living whole, turns out not to be, as he had feared, a fleeting will o’ the wisp, a private and subjective apprehension, but is instead deeply grounded in the shape of the cosmos itself, and in humanity’s special role as the perceiving, reflecting, creative re-shaping, and ultimately, praising part of that cosmos! For the human imagination is a repetition in the finite mind is itself participating in and echoing that eternal and divine act whereby the cosmos exists. In Coleridge’s mature writings the spirit of imagination is no fleeting spirit, but rather the mediating Spirit, a living power, a prime agent, a dynamic and communicative link, not only between the inner and the outer aspects of our own lives, but ultimately between all transcendence and all imminence. It is part of the Trinity, a participation in the Holy Spirit; the dynamic exchange between the Father and the Son, in Heaven and in us.