

What we see in graphic detail in this gospel is the right and wrong use of power. It's not that as Christians we forego power but that we learn to use it as the God-given gift it always was. Its right use is a reflection of our dignity as human beings made in God's image and God is for giving, not a static fortress we have to fight our way into but a fount of holiness, a force flowing out to us so that we too can be swept up into this moment of God's self-offering. We're pushing at an open door. When in last week's gospel passage we hear Jesus telling Peter and the other disciples that what 'you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven' and 'whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven' we are hearing this one dynamic or power at play: we, in God's image, have the power to act as God does but in our confusion, in our sinfulness or selfishness we often misperceive God's image – we are afraid and take the path of security, of equating righteousness with wealth and well-being, of justifying dominion as keeping others in servitude, of finding our security here on earth instead, as we imagine God finds his security only in heaven and by keeping his opponents firmly in hell.

In 1874 one of the most powerful bardic works of the Clearances was written by Iain Mac a' Ghobhainn, John Smith of Earshader on the Isle of Lewis called Spiorad a'Charthannais (The Spirit of Kindliness), it directly addresses the Holy Spirit:

*O gentle Spirit of graciousness!  
If you lived in our midst,  
you would give healing and release  
to people withering with wounds;  
you would inspire the hearts of widows  
to sing with joyful strain,  
and you would not leave them heartlessly  
in the dark prison of their pain..  
But I fear that you have left us  
and fled to heaven above;  
our people have grown in wickedness  
without the presence of your love.*

(quoted p.143 Soil and Soul by Alastair McIntosh)

In a direct parallel with today's parable many of the men who fought at Waterloo found themselves subject to Clearances on their return, such was the greed of their landlords whose land they had secured. And closer to home we can

remember the many Afghans abandoned in Kabul who acted as translators etc and the many other victims of empire left to their own devices and so on. We so readily adopt a fortress mentality when we too are afraid. But the God of kindness, in whose image we are made, is not afraid of giving and forgiving, for love is without end, to be spent recklessly, without reckoning. It may or may not have some return on earth but that isn't what it's for. Seventy seven times or, in some translations, seventy times seven, is a symbol of infinitude, of inexhaustibility: the earth will eventually expire but God's love goes on forever. So learning to live in that love is the one imperative that matters. Or, as John Smith goes on to say, The Spirit of kindness was forced out of the world by

*'the skin of surly selfishness: Nothing I know can pierce it but the arrow of the Lord.'*

In order to love, we have to be wounded by love: to seek and know God's forgiveness, the secret then of God's forgiving nature, and our own

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