

This weekend we celebrate independence day in the United States. This celebration of our independence often gives us time for pause, to reflect upon the great freedoms we have in this country.

In many ways we can relate to the people in the first reading who are told, "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her." The Israelites were of course a very proud people. And the great source of their pride, was of course the fact that they are God's chosen people. That their God was the one True God.

As Americans, we have been blessed by this same God. We may not be a chosen nation in the same sense as the Israelites. But we have been blessed. One of the greatest blessings we have is our freedom. But what is freedom precisely? Our culture seems to tell us that freedom is the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want. But is this truly freedom? Is freedom simply the ability to be free of social restraints, to have a minimal amount of laws dictating what is and is not permissible?

When we look to the Bible, we see that freedom is very important. But freedom is not understood as the ability to do whatever I want. In the Bible, freedom is not the rugged individualism that we in America so often understand it to be. The Bible doesn't provide us with stories of people expressing their individualism as the model of freedom. No, in fact, quite the opposite is true. In the Bible freedom is deeply linked with being part of a community, and being in relationship with God.

In Luke's Gospel, there is a prayer known as the Benedictus. It is a prayer that is recited every morning 365 days a year by the Church during Morning Prayer. And in that prayer, which was originally prayed by Zachariah, the Father of St. John the Baptist, there is a line that I think speaks to the true nature of freedom. Zachariah has just finished speaking about the covenant between God and Israel, and he says, "This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham; to set us free from the hands of our enemies, free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life."

Freedom, in the Bible, is always related with worshiping God and becoming holy. As Catholics, that's what we should be celebrating this weekend when we celebrate our freedom. It's not our ability to be who **we** want to be, to express **our** individuality. No, it's our ability to live life as God's people. To live according to the teachings of our Church, to become the people that God is calling us to be. The great freedom we enjoy is the freedom to live as children of God, the freedom to be holy, and to continue to grow in holiness. That is true freedom.

In the Gospel today, we see Jesus commission 72 disciples to preach the good news and to labor in the harvest. Notice a few things about this commissioning. First, they were not sent off to preach their own message. They were not sent off to do whatever they wanted, but to prepare the people to receive Jesus. Furthermore, they didn't go off by themselves, they were sent in pairs.

Some people may claim that this is a lack of freedom. After all, it seems they were quite restricted by Jesus. He gave them rules to follow: don't carry a money sack, stay in the first house that welcomes you, work (and by work I mean labor). Furthermore, he didn't send them off as individuals to preach **their** message. No, he sent them in community. They had to travel in pairs, and in community prepare the people to receive Christ.

The fact that they had rules to follow, and had a partner with them didn't mean that their freedom was restricted. No, in fact this was the very source of their freedom. If they didn't want to be slaves to false doctrine and sin, if they wanted the freedom to live in the truth, then they needed to follow Christ's commands.

God's commands don't exist because God is trying to manipulate us. They exist because God wants us to live the fullest lives possible. As St. Irenaeus famously stated, "The Glory of God is a human being fully alive." God's statutes, the statutes expressed through the Tradition of the Church, are the tools that we use to secure our freedom, they are the tools we use to become fully alive.

We don't become fully alive by doing whatever we want whenever we want. In fact, when we do that, we often find ourselves in trouble, don't we. We become victims of our selfish interests, our pride, our rugged individualism. We begin to stop following the truth, and instead follow opinions, or perhaps what we wish the truth were. We fall victims to ideas that we can do all things ourselves, and that if we need help we are somehow deficient or lacking.

But that's not what the Gospel teaches us. That's not what Christ teaches us. Christ teaches us that Freedom is rooted in the truth. As Jesus says in the 8th chapter of St. John's Gospel, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The truth will set you free. When Pope Benedict XVI came to the United States in 2008, he reminded us that the truth is not a proposition, but a person, namely Jesus. So if we want to be free, then our lives must be deeply rooted in truth, in Christ Jesus.

And there is great power in living by the truth. The 72 disciples in today's gospel came back amazed at the power that had been given to them – they come back and report to Jesus, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name." Friends, when we are rooted in Christ, when we are connected to Him and working in His name, there is nothing that can stop us. Even Satan falls like lightning. Our freedom derived from living in the Truth becomes the source of endless power.

But now listen to this final warning Jesus gives his disciples, "Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven." Here again Christ reminds us that we don't rejoice in ourselves, or in our accomplishments, but in God, who has called us to live with him in Heaven.

As we celebrate our freedom this weekend, I think we'd do well to heed this warning of Jesus. I'm not saying we shouldn't celebrate. In fact, quite the opposite. But let's celebrate true freedom. Let's be mindful to give thanks to God who has given us a land where we are free to worship him without fear, where we are free to grow in holiness and righteousness. Let's remember that the freedom we enjoy goes far beyond our independence from other nations. It goes beyond our free-market capitalism and let us celebrate the fact that our true freedom comes from our liberation from the deceptive power of sin. Let us be thankful that we are able to live live in relationship with Jesus, who is the truth. Let us praise God for allowing us to live with the dignity of sons and daughters of God.