

**5th Sunday of Easter
May 10, 2009**

J.A. Loftus, S.J.

“Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.” This is a perfect agricultural image for this time of year. The grapes will take a while yet, but by now the flowers are budding. All has been mulched, watered, pruned and so much is already displaying its beauty. And you and I are free to enjoy Spring again.

There’s that word “free” again. Freedom. It’s what the whole church prays for this week. It is the prayer I just voiced for all of us at our opening: “Lord...give us true freedom and bring us to the inheritance you promised.”

Did you notice that little adjective before freedom? “True” freedom. That must mean there is such a thing as “false” freedom? Some of you know, I’m sure, that St. Ignatius was always extremely careful in his *Spiritual Exercises* to tell retreatants to only ask for what they really desired in prayer. To be specific and to name the gift you wanted carefully. Perhaps because Ignatius felt that God might just grant your wishes at prayer. So we had better know what we’re asking for. And we did all just ask for “true” freedom, and our promised inheritance.

Do you ever think much about whether you are really free? I don't. At least not much. In this country and at this time and place in my world, the thought doesn't much cross my mind. I'm not in prison—at least not at the moment—so, in that sense, at least, I'm free. We enjoy freedom of religion; we can believe, or not, anything we wish. We enjoy freedom of the press. So we can believe, or not, anything we read or hear. And no one unduly coerces many of us without our taking recourse under the law to adjudicate the situation.

So in lots of ways, I am free already. What could Jesus have meant then? None of those freedoms I just mentioned are false freedoms. But are they true freedom?

You will remember, I'm sure, that the bible talks a great deal about freedom. It was freedom from slavery that prompted God to create the Covenant with Abraham in order to set God's people free. It was freedom from idolatry and sin that prompted God's promise to Moses. In the New Testament, listen to Zechariah's song at his son John's birth: "This was the oath God swore to our father, Abraham, to see us free from the hands of our enemies, free to serve God without fear..." (Lk 1:73-74). Listen to St. Paul, in his usual blunt fashion: "...for freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1).

What are they all talking about? We are free, aren't we? The great German poet, Goethe, offered a caution we might heed: "None are so helplessly enslaved as those who falsely believe they are free."

Singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson wrote a piece a few years back that said: "Freedom's just another word for nothin' else to lose. And nothin' ain't worth nothin', but it's free...." ("Me and Bobby McGee")

There is a much more profound freedom of which Jesus speaks again today. And it ain't nothin.' His image is, as usual, clear, not at all abstract (like all this talk of freedom), and it is blunt. To live *in me* is true freedom—and it is the only true freedom you will ever know. Just stay grafted onto the vine and you will blossom and bear fruit. That is my Promise; that is your inheritance.

It does take some work on our part. You and I have to really want to be free. We have to believe it is possible. But, in the end, all it requires is that we try. The command of freedom, true freedom, is simply to try. When we fail, God assures us constantly there is forgiveness always available in copious amounts. (Just listen to some of Jesus' other home-spun stories about lost sheep, or prodigal sons and daughters. Forgiveness is a given!) But you have to keep trying to be free—really free. You have to *want* to blossom in the

garden of the Kingdom.

I'm sorry to break this news, but we can be very dense sometimes. And we can overly complicate the life of faith. All the laws and rules and institutions are quite secondary from this perspective—not entirely unimportant—just secondary. What's primary really is rather simple. It is about what we really *desire*—really desire in our hearts for ourselves.

The poet, W.H. Auden, has a little ditty that succinctly describes the dynamics of all spiritual growth. He says:

“If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try;

If we don't, it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die.”

Maybe we really need to imagine the bud *wanting* to blossom. Really *desirous* to bloom into beauty. It sounds a little “new-age-y” (and I did just see the new *Star Trek* movie yesterday), but then again, listen to Jesus.

“Neither can you [bear fruit at all] unless you remain in me.”

Now what was that prayer I voiced for us all? “Lord...give us *true* freedom and bring us to the inheritance you promised.” Anyone want to say AMEN?