

5/07/17 4 Easter A

-- One priest recently recalled a time when he visited Disneyworld in Orlando and stayed at one of the hotels on their property. One warm afternoon he was at the pool. There were countless kids there, making a whole lot of noise.

-- There was also a group of about half a dozen mothers, sitting together in the sun and having a drink. Most of the time they seemed oblivious to the noise the children were making.

-- But if one of them heard one of their children, especially if she sensed some sign of distress, she would recognize that voice above all the other screaming voices in the pool area. She would immediately take notice and go to see what was wrong.

-- It's kind of a "sixth sense" most mothers have, and it reminds us of the type of sensitivity Jesus has for all his people. We encounter the familiar image in our gospel of Jesus as the shepherd who hears the individual voices of his sheep, much like those mothers recognized their children's individual voices.

-- This is a comforting image to most of us, because it shows the personal care the Lord has for each and every one of us. The same goes for the psalm we sang today, perhaps the most famous of all the 150 psalms.

-- Yes, Jesus has that individual care for each of us. Jesus seeks us out when we are lost, and wants to bring us back. And he desires to bring us abundant life, not just a comfortable existence. He wants us to experience true and lasting joy.

-- But there's another part to this image of the sheep and the shepherd. Notice the gospel says the sheep follow him because they recognize his voice. They are attuned to its sound, its inflection, its nuances.

-- That doesn't happen automatically with us. We have to develop the art of listening to God. This requires regular time in prayer, in reading God's word in the scripture, in opening ourselves to what God is saying.

-- In other words, it takes practice, just like any skill. It takes perseverance and not giving up when things are tough. Remember how Jesus stayed with it when he experienced intense suffering.

-- Developing a listening heart is critical for the intention we focus on today as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Notice how those people on the day of Pentecost were cut to the heart because of Peter's words.

-- There may well be men and women in our midst who are called to follow Christ in special vocations to priesthood, diaconate, religious life and apostolic life. They need to hear God's word in their hearts. WE need to hear it too.

-- To you young people: Pray for the grace to understand where God is calling you in life. Be open to the possibility that he may be calling you to a life of special service in the Church. Be willing to answer the call.

-- To parents: Just as those mothers at the pool were sensitive to their children's voices, help your children to be sensitive to God's voice. Speak positively about priesthood and religious life and help them to be open to the possibility God may call them to a special vocation.

-- To all of you: The Church needs good and faithful shepherds. They do not fall out of the sky or come from some foreign land. They come from within our own communities. Develop the habit of prayer and listening to God's word, and pray for more vocations.

-- Encourage those who you sense may be called to a life of special service in the Church. Our future depends upon this.

-- Yes, the Good Shepherd wants us to have life in abundance. But that life will only come if we are willing to listen to the voice of the shepherd, and to answer his call.