

A priest I know complains that his elderly mother, who is otherwise a very good person, goes gambling too much. She spends so much time at the boats that the staff members there call her “Captain.” One day, this mother said to her son the priest, “Do you know the difference between praying at church and praying at the boats?” He said, “No, what’s the difference?” She said, “When you pray at the boats, you really mean it.”

When we pray we often ask God for things. This is all right. Jesus encouraged us to ask in order to receive, seek to find and knock to have the door opened to us. But another important form of prayer is to listen for what God has to say. In any relationship of value, each partner speaks and listens, gives and receives.

In today’s first reading, when Abram prayed, he listened to God. He had lived all his life in Ur, a city located in modern-day Iraq. He farmed, married, raised a family, and grew to old age. Then, one day, while Abram was at prayer, God asked him to leave behind his land, his kinsfolk and his father’s house, and move to a foreign land. At the end of one’s life, you usually don’t pack up and move off to a country you don’t know, unsure of who will be there, how you will work, or what you will eat. But Abram did this. He listened to God, left everything behind, and trusted that he could make a new home. Prayer can be dangerous.

During Lent, many of us devote extra time to prayer. When we do, we can spend more of it listening to God and less time asking for things. Just being with God builds the relationship. If we also fast and give alms during Lent, we become less attached to the things of this world, and more focused on things of the next. We become more agreeable to do what God asks. But we usually don’t know what God asks until we take the time to listen.

A lot of times people complain that they pray to God and don’t get what they ask for. Maybe God has the same complaint. When we pray, God asks us for things – some changes in the way we think and act. Just as we don’t always get an answer to our requests, God doesn’t always get an answer to his. It is important to pray for things we need – not necessarily for things we want, like a jackpot at the boats. But it is also important to pray for the things God needs. Listening is also a good form of prayer.

Anytime we pray, we express our belief that there is a God, that God has a relationship with us, that God can make things different, and that God wants to help in our need. We also acknowledge that God may want some things of us. Abram opened his heart to God, listened to what God had to say, and did what God asked – even though it must have seemed like a crazy idea. This Lent, as we fast and give alms, let us listen for what God is asking of us. That kind of prayer can be dangerous, but it always leads to peace.