

Ocean of mercy washes away sin

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 10:27-30. (R1) Acts 13:14, 43-52. (R2) Revelation 7:9, 14-17.

A new airplane was on an experimental flight. It was full of reporters and journalists. After takeoff the captain announced over the loudspeaker: "I'm delighted to be your pilot and captain on this historical flight. But I have to tell you about some minor inconveniences that have occurred. Passengers on the right side can, if they look out the window, see the closest engine vibrating. No cause for alarm. There are four engines.

"You may also notice that the second engine is glowing or burning. Still no worry. We have two more engines on the left side.

"Those on the left side shouldn't worry if you notice one engine has been missing for about 10 minutes.

"However, one thing seems a bit more serious. If you look down, you will notice a crack has appeared along the aisle. Through that crack you can see the waves of the Atlantic and a small lifeboat. Your captain is speaking from that lifeboat."

I suppose there are some situations in life about which we shouldn't joke. Sometimes some people's lives are falling apart and they fear their captain is as remote as the one in the lifeboat far below in the Atlantic.

The Gospel tells us that God is a



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

shepherd who never abandons his sheep. That he is greater than any temptation or problem in life — "my sheep shall never perish."

Some time back there was a humorous "Cathy" cartoon strip. Cathy is struggling with her diet. Panel 1: I will take a drive but won't go near the grocery store. Panel 2: I will drive by the grocery store, but I won't go in. Panel 3: I will go in the store but only walk down the aisle where the candy is on sale. Panel 4: I'll look at the candy but not buy any. Panel 5: I'll buy some but not open it up. Panel 6: I'll open it but just look at it. Panel 7: I'll just take a taste but not eat it. Panel 8: Eat, eat, eat.

Temptation is like that. But God is greater than any temptation. If we pray for help in time of temptation, we will be able to resist any temptation — "no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

But even if we should succumb to temptation, God is greater than our

sins.

Once a very holy woman living in northern Africa worried about her sins and God's forgiveness. Jesus appeared to her and said, "Take a teaspoon of water and go to the Mediterranean Sea and drop the teaspoon of water into the sea."

She did. Then Jesus said to her, "Now go back to the sea and get your teaspoon of water."

"Jesus, I can't," she replied. "It is lost in the sea."

"So my child," Jesus explained, "my mercy is like the ocean; your sins are like the teaspoon of water. When you bring them to me in confession, they are forgiven and lost forever. My Father is greater than all, in what he has given me, and there is no snatching out of his hand."

God compared himself to a shepherd. In Jesus' day shepherds worked very hard to take care of their sheep. Sheep are totally helpless. They have no way to protect themselves from other animals. So shepherds carried three weapons with them to protect the sheep.

The first weapon was a club to fight off wild animals preying on the sheep. The second was a staff to keep the sheep from wandering and to lift them up from a ledge if they happened to fall there. The third was a slingshot to hurl stones at poachers and drive them away.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shep-

herd." He looks after us his sheep. He doesn't need weapons like a club or staff or slingshot. God has his ways; often we cannot understand, but we must trust him. For nothing can defeat God. Nothing can ever take us away from God.

"Know that the Lord is God; he made us, his we are; his people, the flock he tends ... His faithfulness endures to all generations."

Therefore sing joyfully to the Lord and serve him with gladness.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, May 4

Acts 11:1-18; John 10:1-10

Tuesday, May 5

Acts 11:19-26; John 10:22-30

Wednesday, May 6

Acts 12:24-13:5; John 12:44-50

Thursday, May 7

Acts 13:13-25; John 13:16-20

Friday, May 8

Acts 13:26-33; John 14:1-6

Saturday, May 9

Acts 13:44-52; John 14:7-14

Refusing Holy Spirit's help may preclude repentance

Q. I always turn to your column first, and now I have a question that has plagued the minds of Christians for centuries.

The sin of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," spoken of in the synoptic Gospels: What is it? According to the Gospels it is the only sin that will never be forgiven.

Is there such a sin? If so, what is it? (Delaware)

A. I'm not sure how many minds have been plagued by the question or how many people have lain awake at night wondering about it. It is more than a little interesting, however.

Mark (3:29), Matthew (12:31) and Luke (12:10) all speak of a sin, or blasphemy, against the Holy Spirit. Matthew adds that the sin shall not be forgiven either in this world or the next.

The most obvious explanation comes from the context in Matthew. Je-



question corner

BY FATHER JOHN DIETZEN

sus, with the power of the Holy Spirit, has just cured a blind and mute man. Pharisees nearby claim the cure happened by the power of a devil.

Jesus responds with the words we're discussing. To attribute to the devil an action done by God's power is, he seems clearly to say, a sin, a mockery, of the Spirit of God.

Many Christian commentators have tried to delve further into the subject. St. Thomas Aquinas and St. August-

ine, for example, believe that Jesus meant the sin of final unrepentance, a refusal to repent of one's seriously sinful rejection of God even at the moment of death.

This probably remains the most common view, since it is total, final rejection of all helps the Holy Spirit offers to turn away from evil and toward God.

Another way of saying the same thing is that anyone who consciously and maliciously refuses the helps offered by the Holy Spirit to keep us from sin in the first place sins against the Spirit.

Many helps of the Spirit, says St. Thomas, are available in our lives to help us avoid sin.

The gift of hope keeps us from despair, the gift of fear of the Lord keeps us from presuming in the wrong way on God's mercy and love, and so on.

All these gifts, according to

Thomas, are effects of the presence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. When we refuse to hope, when we refuse to acknowledge the majesty and power of God in our lives, we in effect tell the Spirit we don't need him.

Repentance can be impossible, since in that frame of mind there cannot be enough humility for us even to admit we have sinned, that we need repentance at all.

Whatever these Gospel passages may mean, there is finally one all-essential truth to remember. If we have sinned, our merciful and loving Father is always there with open arms, ready to receive us back.

And the Holy Spirit is always present, ready to help us go there.

Father Dietzen is pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Bloomington, Ill. Questions for this column may be sent to him at Box 325, Peoria, Ill. 61651.

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