

THAW!

December 8, 2007

An unofficial, monthly on-line magazine
Of/for Canadian Anglican and Ecumenical Franciscans

Published by:

The Highland Shepherd,

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At

www.msgr.ca

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OUR HOST: THE HIGHLAND SHEPHERD

A unique, Christian site, featuring many resources for individuals and for parish study and action. Not without humour! A creation of Canon Jim Irvine, of the Diocese of Fredericton. Cruise the site; it's useful, edifying, fun, original, surprising!

IN THIS ISSUE

A review of "The Coast of Utopia" in three plays by Tom Stoppard. The three dramas are: "Voyage", "Shipwreck" and "Salvage". It is a replay of the drama of revolution in the mid 18th century and especially of the lives of Russian intellectuals – "the intelligencia" – who work in vain to bring to their beloved home land the same promises of freedom and justice which obsessed Europe at the time. A story of courage, betrayal, disappointment and persistence. The titles of the three plays in the drama are easily, too easily, adaptable to many other life experiences. The people portrayed on Stoppard's stage are ancestors of those today who find freedom and justice waning in the glare of global terror. A meditation on the Franciscan virtue of humility follows, linking humility to truth and truth to freedom. Ty Ragan has

provided a poem, one of a set soon to be published and he would like us to purchase his book. And finally I am asking readers to download from "The Highland Shepherd" the eight Advent Meditations on "The Advent O's" which you will find nearby on the site for home use after December 16.

THE COAST OF UTOPIA –

Tom Stoppard

The recent trilogy, "The Coast of Utopia" is a gripping staging of early revolutionary initiatives in Russia in the mid 19th century. It is the story of Russian intelligensia trying to find their way to freedom and justice for their nation out of the darkness and serfdom of Imperial Russia. Europe is aflame with philosophy and ideas.

The titles of the trilogy invite themselves into every Christian sermon touching on the theme of hope; or justice; or freedom or God's apparent desire that utopia come to pass, that people will beat swords in to plowshares. They are called, "Journey", "Shipwreck" and "Salvage". What preacher would not drool to use these as titles for a fresh series of sermons!

Indeed, they seem to be Stoppard's own particularization of the Hegelian march of Spirit in history; from thesis, to antithesis, to (new) synthesis; "particularization" because the so-called Idea of the Spirit, takes flesh in these plays, wherein people struggle, are imprisoned, fall in and out of love, give birth and die tragically.

The relatively small group of writers, publishers and agitators begin in about 1836 where they find themselves liberated by German discovery of Spirit of progress; and throw the despair of their bondage, (they are among the well to do) and begin to proclaim the coming new age of the Spirit. In Russia.

Their journey takes them to Paris, the vortex of new and revolutionary thinking, where they publish several underground journals of liberation, smuggled back into Russia. Europe is aflame with revolutionary movements. The stage bustles with radical poets, writers, historians, literary critics. Paris is the centre of violent political change. The Second Republic is born from mobs, bourgeoisie, and peasants. But their movement falters. Napoleon III takes over and the republic ends in 1852. The proletariat is again excluded; most of our coterie, the Russian intellegensia, are "shipwrecked" by the new order which falls short of their hopes for freedom. They are divided by disorganized energies squandered among fleeting revolutions in Poland, Germany, Italy and not mention, France. Political change takes place, but it flounders on bourgeois shoals well short of the coasts of Utopia. All of this is to be a prelude to the great revolution to come – in beloved Russia.

In the final play, "Salvage" the remnants of the group are in London, in a fellowship of aging national revolutionaries. They are passé. Except, yes, they manage to publish yet another revolutionary journal.

Karl Marx is in an out of the story. In the final scenes, his momentous work "The Communist Manifesto" has been published, and ignored by the liberal democrats of the group. Except, says one of them looking at the sky; "There's going to be a storm" A rumble of thunder is heard.

A storm indeed!

I found the trilogy frightening, being able to look back in retrospect. These men and women often courageously dedicated their careers, their lives, for what they believed was needed in both Russia and Europe. But little did they know where they were heading and how their ideas played into the horrors of the next century. And even today, Russia is not what they hoped for. In the end, they come to the understanding that there is no Utopia in history. Utopia is the best which you can imagine and point to, in the here and now.

Stoppard raises the curtains on the likes of us 150 years ago, building for change; their optimism, their heady experience of freedom, their painful infidelities and above all, their tireless efforts to bring about a new Russia. They are the revolutionaries; for only the intelligentsia knew enough, cared enough, to take it on.

Through the darkness of Communism, past Stalin and his successors, we peer back and see that they could have contributed to the freedoms we enjoy and may be throwing away. "What" we might ask, "is our present journey, do we risk shipwreck, and will we have to salvage the wreckage".

Do we keep the faith?

An excerpted poem from Ty Ragan's collection of canticles and collects: *One Voice in Protest: Poems in Hope* released by Palabras Press in April 2008.

One

Mother God

Wash your compassion
Into me

Remove my self-imposed
Laryngitis
Allow words of wisdom
No venom

To come forth

Use me God
To speak your love
Into our ailing country

Empower me!
To speak out
Against the injustice
So evident.

If you would like to order a copy of *One Voice*...please mail a cheque or money order for \$20 Canadian made out to Tyler Ragan and your mailing address to 4631-31 Avenue N.E.; Calgary, AB; T1Y 1G8. Your copy will be sent upon the release of the book.

THE ADVENT "O's"

Find them on this site, "The Highland Shepherd". Each day from December 16 is given a little home liturgy, including a sonnet of mine, to be downloaded and used in home candle lighting ceremonies.