

Harris Athanasiadis induction to Armour Heights PC:

September 10, 2017

**Heady Days**  
(Acts 2: 37-47; Rev 4)

“And day by day the Lord added to their number” (2:47).

Heady days these must have been.

But—what if this verse were read today like so?

“And day by day the Lord *subtracted* from their number?”

Shock? Would this re-wording engender shock? Today, perhaps a pang of acute recognition? Or blasé indifference? Protest perhaps, or denial?

It depends what you or I yearn for, identify with, where you or I are coming from. Context matters, as our venerable professor, Douglas John Hall, drilled into Harris and I whilst we were still green seminarians—almost thirty years ago. What time is it? Professor Hall would ask? Not meaning clock-time but this moment in time. Over against a certitude, which might take for granted that God was the same yesterday today and forever, and that everything which needed to be said or understood about God had already been said and fixed, in the Bible, or in the Creeds, by the church during its long history. Over against this once for all-ness, this fixedness, Hall asked us, and any who followed his work, to acknowledge the *hic-et-nunc*, the here and now, what were the pressing issues facing us today? Is there a word from the Lord for us today? To use an analogy often attributed to Martin Luther:<sup>1</sup> “where was the battle raging?” Within the entire battle, where was the exact point where it all mattered—where was the tipping point?

In the early church, *survival* itself was where the battle was raging. Would this battered little community, following the brutal execution of its master, and facing its own persecution by the powers that be—would it survive? Not just survive but why? Survive for what reason? What, or better *whom*, did this movement serve? Whom did it witness to?

Almost 400 years later (380 AD), when Christianity itself was declared to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, *authenticity* was where the battle was raging. Was this, now established faith, to become bought and sold, coopted for use by the empire? When priests were invited to crown the Emperor and to baptize his children, when Christianity was no longer a movement but an established religion, could it still remain authentic to its Master and Lord, could it—speak truth to power?

The battle for authenticity continued throughout the European establishment of the church in the Middle Ages—as the church became used to its power and influence over souls and bodies from the cradle to the grave for nobleman and peasant alike. But power is a double-edged sword—it shapes and it corrupts. The Christian religion shaped the European continent from the heights of its scholarship to the depths of its politics, from its art to architecture. But the faith lost something in the process. The church lost its first love for its Saviour and Lord (Rev 2.4), its

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<sup>1</sup> The quote comes from a 19<sup>th</sup> Century novel by Elizabeth Rundle Charles,<sup>2</sup> called *The Chronicles of the Schoenberg Cotta Family* (Thomas Nelson, 1864). <https://creation.com/battle-quote-not-luther>

hunger for the truth, its humility before God. Its magisterium became corrupt in the world Christ came to save. In parts, the church struggled against this corruption. There were reforming movements throughout the Middle Ages, including the monastic movement which gave us such beautiful souls as Francis of Assisi (1181-1226); the Rhineland Mystics, such as John Tauler (1300-1361) and Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), who emerged during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) & Black Death (1347-1351) producing spiritual insight which remains unmatched; the English mystics of the fourteenth century including Dame Julian of Norwich—we still immerse ourselves in them to great benefit.

And yet, during these Middle Ages, the body politic was bearing heavily upon sensitive souls seeking the way of salvation. Salvation itself seemed to be up for sale. The Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century cried for a pathway back to that primal relationship between God and each human being. “We wish to see Jesus” cried the Reformers, echoing those first seekers who came asking for Jesus (Jn 12.21).

Following the Reformation, and some would say aided and abetted by the changes in the politics and the thinking brought about through the Reformation, Enlightenment reason, as well as the great emergence of modern science and the awesome technological innovation which has attended it, brought about, first in the West and then throughout the globe, a radical questioning of everything which was once considered sacred.

I am not a church historian, and I do not mean to go through two thousand years of church history, but we are today in Europe and North America facing a different battle—though the church in each of these continents faces slightly different challenges. But we may not speak and act meaningfully as a Christian community, unless we ask again, for our generation, no less than previous generations have done for theirs, “where is the battle raging?”

I cannot presume to answer this question fully, not by myself and not in a sermon, but one place we all know and experience this battle is in the marginalization of the church today. The battle has raged: from survival, to authenticity, to—marginalization.

We today as Christians in the Western hemisphere have experienced marginalization. We are no longer at the center. There are small and exceptional enclaves, may their tribe increase, but the centers of power no longer care very much what the church thinks. Most people in the neighborhood or on the street pass us by. And many of our internal battles, are pretty much that, internal battles, including the current battle for full inclusion. Much of our society has moved on.

I speak this not to depress, but to be honest, so that we may honestly seek a word from the Lord. Each time brings its own issues, its own battles, and each generation is responsible to do the hard work of seeking a word from the Lord for its time and place.

There are plenty of reasons why we have come to this marginalization, and many roads which led to here, but in several ways, we are closer to the early church today than ever before. In our marginalization, we too are fighting for survival as well as the meaning of our existence, with the one significant difference—we are no longer brand-new upstarts. Christianity was a brand-new and suspect movement, two thousand years ago—now much water has passed under the bridge.

Yet, once again, in the great bazaar of belief and unbelief, where many faiths and spiritualities, as well as none whatsoever, hawk their wares, we need to *earn* a hearing all over again.

But just here I think, we can listen for a word from the Lord for us today.

Back in the book of Acts, Peter is compelled to speak out of a stupendous experience of the Spirit which broke in upon these followers then frozen in fear. They were huddled together, behind closed doors. Their faith was not dead—but it was battered and bruised. They were in shock because of the brutal public degradation and execution of their master. What they thought they knew was no more. Yet, while huddled in prayer, they were visited by the power from on high, a power *not* their own!

Why were they huddled together praying? What were they praying for? They were praying for the promise of the Father to be fulfilled. In the Luke-Acts continuum, Jesus' last words to his closest followers was to stay together and to wait in the city *until* they were clothed with the power from on high (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4).

This they were doing. Anything but cocky, anything but confident, they were waiting like beggars for love and the affirmation of their shaken faith—and this deepest desire of their soul was fulfilled beyond all expectation, beyond anything they could fabricate. Some in the street considered them drunk, and this judgement was not far wrong, but it was not wine or strange spirits they were drunk with, but the very presence of God, now revealed in Jesus whom they acknowledged as the Christ of God. In this name, the name of their <sup>2</sup>cursed and despised—now resurrected Lord: repentance, salvation, baptism, the breaking of bread and prayer, is replicated three thousand times in the three thousand persons who were added to the nascent community on that day (2:38).

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So what now for us here?

We are the congregations, the church in NA, we are, we are called to be, now more than ever, places where the divine is witnessed to, where the candles are lit, where the sacred is sacred, not a sacred cow kind of sacred, but a living expression of love, joy, peace, and faithfulness (Gal 5: 22-23).

Why? Because the world needs such communities like parched and burning ground needs rain. Especially in the Western hemisphere, where we live and breathe and raise our families, the faith is down to the embers, I don't mean the Christian faith only, though this is too true, but Western civilization's faith in itself. Its experiment seems to have failed, the Enlightenment which affirmed "man" as the measure of all things, has led today to a certain emptiness of goal and purpose. The shine has rubbed off. What is left is the husk of market capitalism. We live by the rise and fall of markets, even our environment is monetized. We seem to have no deeper way for public speech than market indicators. Technology itself feeds off this monetization, with neither rhyme nor reason, no deeper reason than that we should have more, and more advanced. More variety, more to consume all the time, but with no final goal, no real reason why this should be so.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Brawley, in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings: Acts and the Epistles* p. 534-535.

So now, I think, for us here, our worship and witness needs to be a worldly worship. In the best sense of loving, the good, the bad and the ugly, even the unlovely, even sacrificially. Why? As a witness, as a pointer, to redemption which is not man-made.

We are not in the ascendancy, as a Christian movement in the city I mean, you know that, but no matter, that is not even our affair, what is our affair, is that our words come voiced from deep chambers of spirits molded by the Spirit. The rest is God's affair. As Mother Teresa once said, one day we will not be judged on how successful we were—that is an alien standard we are in thrall to. We will not be judged on how successful we are but on how faithful. That is all that will be asked, and as Paul the Apostle said, one day it will all be tried by the fire, and what survives, survives (1 Cor 3:12-15)—and thank God that the Judge, the living flame, is also, as Karl Barth reminds us, the Judge judged in our place. Thank God, the judge is the same *One* who has loved us from the foundation of the world.

Why then, would we not proclaim this gospel, in the face of secularism, which is devolving into nihilism, especially in the bastions of the West: in Paris, or London, or Geneva, or Strasbourg, where cultural memory, never mind religious memory, is turning into thin soup. Where Western civilization is by its own hand preparing a cozy bed to lie and die in? In this time and place, why would we not proclaim, and live, gospel?

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The seer of Patmos, was about to die, in exile, weak and stricken in age, but before he was gathered into the communion of saints he was exalted in spirit and given this vision:  
*Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures . . . full of eyes in front and behind (symbolizing unceasing watchfulness) . . . Day and night **without ceasing** they sing:*

*“Holy, holy, holy,  
 the Lord God the Almighty,  
 who was and is and is to come.”*

<sup>9</sup> *And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne . . .* <sup>10</sup> *the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne (acknowledging that all power comes from God), while singing,*

<sup>11</sup> *“You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
 to receive glory and honor and power,  
 for you created all things,  
 and by your will they existed and were created.”*

Between now and then: now more than ever, let us stand together: lay and ordained, the *laos*, the people, are essential, meaning that without the people there is no church, and no witness, and no voice, at least no Christian voice in a city such as Toronto, or for that matter, in the aforementioned bastions of the west.

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Hear now the charge:

For now, here, in Armour Heights, since this is where God has gathered us as Ecclesia this evening, may the gospel be preached deeply and well, and heard deeply and well, and talked through and the practice of it found for such a time as this. Not just this evening of course but in this new phase of ministry that you enter, minister and people of this congregation.

Harris, I exhort you now to do what you have been called to do: care for the people who have been committed to your charge. Love your people—as I know you will. Let it be your joy to minister to them in the name of Christ. In good times and in bad go steadily about the business of enfolding infants, nurturing the young, sustaining the mature, comforting the afflicted, proclaiming salvation, celebrating the risen Lord, burying the dead, serving the least of these, who are Christ's brothers and sisters, in your neighbourhood and around the world.

*And may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,<sup>21</sup> make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb.13.20-21)*