

Every now and then the Scriptures use a word that is loaded with meaning, but which unfortunately is hard to get across easily from the original Hebrew or Greek into English. That's part of why they have us pastors learn such things at the seminary, so we can flesh them out for people who may not want to beat their heads against a textbook to learn a dead language.

In the Gospel lesson this morning from Luke, we hear Jesus speaking about fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world. It's the last word there, "world," that's the loaded one in this verse. In English, "world" can be used several different ways. It can refer to the planet Earth. It can refer to all of creation in general – the "entire world."

Here, it's something else. The word in Greek is *oikoumenē*, which means the inhabited world, civilized world, or civilization.

Why does this matter? Well, there have been nations in history who, in pride, referred to themselves as the *oikoumenē*. They saw themselves as truly civilized, the height of human power and glory.

The Roman Empire of Jesus' day often used this term for itself. In the east of the empire, centered around Greece, you had the finest culture, with excellent arts, sculpture, frescoes, theater, and so on. You also had the most sophisticated thought, with names we still recognize today, like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and many others. Greek was the common language of the Empire, having been spread by the earlier conquests of Alexander the Great.

Joined to this Greek cultural tradition was the glory of Rome herself in the western part of the empire. While not as sophisticated, one might say, the west had great achievements as well. Roman engineering was a marvel of the day, creating great structures like the Colosseum, building massive aqueducts to bring fresh water from miles and miles away, mastering the use of the then-new technology of concrete, which was leaps and bounds above the stones and bricks used by other, lesser civilizations.

The Romans also put their practicality into governance, being proud of their Republican form of government (even when it became an empire) and the freedoms it provided (for some, at least). And above all, the Roman military was unstoppable, with the Legions crushing foes everywhere from northern Africa to what is now Scotland to the great Euphrates River in the east.

The Roman Empire was unmatched in power, in wealth, in knowledge, in culture, in size, in anything that mattered. Nothing could challenge the eternal city and her great empire. Truly, it was the *oikoumenē*, the "world" for all practical purposes.

Yet underneath this grand exterior, cracks grew and rot spread with surprising frequency. Political strife was always present, with multiple civil wars taking place throughout the empire's history.

In order to finance her wars and building projects and grandeur, taxes and inflation increasingly burdened the citizens and strained the economy.

The leadership was often plagued with incompetence and corruption, joined by an ever-expanding bureaucracy. Rome was the eternal city, but it was also seen as the sewer of the empire, where all the filth drained to at one point or another.

How to distract all the citizens from such problems? You've perhaps heard the phrase: "bread and circuses." During much of the empire's history, grain was either given out for free or subsidized by the government for many of Rome's citizens. It was an early form of welfare, and it was also used to buy votes and keep the citizens happy.

In addition to this, the government, especially the emperor or individuals seeking popular approval and votes, would fund the games, the great entertainment events in places such as the Colosseum. You'd have chariot races, gladiator battles, slaves and exotic animals shipped in to die for the pleasure of the spectators. As wealth flowed into the empire, so did her love of pleasure, which then became a means to ignore all the problems.

Now hopefully you can see that this is more than just a history lesson, but are noting the parallels between the Roman Empire and our own nation.

What nation on the globe today could claim the title of oikoumenē, and think of herself as the height of human power and civilization? The United States of America!

The President of the United States has often been referred to as "the leader of the free world." American popular culture has diffused throughout the globe, with Hollywood being but one example. Many leading universities and places of thought are found in the United States. English is spoken all over the world, started by the British Empire but greatly expanded as other countries wanted to be able to interact and trade with us.

We pride ourselves on our government, our Constitution and its freedoms being seen as almost sacred by many. Our military is seen by us as the single most powerful one on the globe, projecting force all over the world. And our wealth is unsurpassed by any other single nation, with the average American citizen enjoying a standard of living above nearly every other place on earth.

Surely, the United States of America is the modern oikoumenē, the high point of civilization in this day and age.

Yet increasingly, this facade of splendor has been shown to cover a rotten underbelly. Our economy has been hit by inflation, and the results visible not just in the numbers on the news but the numbers in our retirement accounts or the prices in the grocery store. Our knowledge and wisdom are more and more just the talking points of our preferred cable news show host.

Our government is endlessly plagued by bickering and infighting, incompetence and laziness, lying and hypocrisy. Our military has been shown to be far from invincible. We can feel the distress of our nation, and we respond with perplexity, confusion as to why it continues happening.

So what makes us all go along with this? Again, bread and circuses. The “bread,” if you will, is enormous, with everything from Medicare and Medicaid to Social Security and stimulus checks to various subsidies and programs to all funded by tax dollars and deficit spending. Money is used to gain favor to one extent or another by almost every politician, be that through the promise to give out more money, or to tax less of your money.

And then you have the circuses – entertainment. This isn’t directly funded by the government, but it’s a ridiculously large part of our society. Think about how much of our time and money is spent on “having fun.” How many billions of dollars are spent on everything from football stadiums to Netflix subscriptions to smartphone games and everything in between? How many Americans are addicted to things which promise pleasure, such as video games, gambling, pornography, or drugs?

And Christians are not immune to chasing after pleasure and worldly comfort. As we see the problems facing the world, it’s easy to decide they are just too much, that we can’t hope to do anything about them and so we’ll just go along with them. Easier to just go with the flow and hope that God grades on the curve.

That’s why Jesus warns us: “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life.” Watch yourselves, because if you cease fighting against temptation, you’ll be swept away by it. Watch yourselves, because if your foundation is this world, when it crumbles, you too will fall.

But the Church’s foundation is not this world, this *oikoumenē*. We are not fighting against temptation and sin with a futile purpose. In fact, the battle isn’t ours at all. The battle belongs to the Lord, who is over all things.

Humanity may think it is the greatest power there is, but it is God Almighty whose will truly guides the world, even our vaunted *oikoumenē*. It was God who sustained the Roman Empire, not its culture or its knowledge or its military might, in order that it might be used in His great plan of salvation.

God brought a prideful Augustus to power, and used his pride to bring about a census that ended up with Joseph and Mary being brought to Bethlehem, just as the prophets had foretold.

God allowed the Romans to rule Jerusalem – the City of David – and to place their governor there, so that His only-begotten Son might be crucified by them, and for them.

God sustained the great peace, the *Pax Romana*, so that His apostles and evangelists could spread the saving Gospel through a great part of the world that had a common language and good roads and relatively safe travel.

And when in His perfect wisdom He knew the time was right, God allowed that *oikoumenē* to be shaken and finally collapse. It was a terrifying thing for those who trusted in Roman power and glory to watch their idol be shattered, but amid all the shaking and distress God preserved His people, and even used this to spread His Gospel beyond the imperial borders. With the rising and falling of nations, the good and gracious will of God is always done.

This is still true today. God has raised up our nation as He has all nations, and He has used it to accomplish His will.

In many places such as here, the Gospel is still proclaimed, the Lord still sustaining His flock, calling out to those sheep lost in the wilderness. The Lord is using the wealth He has given to His Christians in this land to fund missionaries to other lands, using the knowledge He has given His Christians to translate the Bible into all sorts of different languages, using the peace He has given to allow His Christians to take that His Gospel throughout the globe, as well as worship freely in our own land.

It is God, not man, who grants the blessings we enjoy. And when the time is right according to His perfect wisdom, God will allow our nation to crumble and fall like the others that have come and gone before. That will be a difficult time, especially for we who have gotten so used to all the good things, the conveniences, the pleasures, which our country provides.

For those whose trust is in such human things, it will truly seem like the end. People will faint from fear and foreboding as their idols are shattered and shown to be meaningless. Those who have allowed themselves to be ensnared with the pleasures, the drunkenness, the concerns of this life will be caught in a trap.

But as Christians, we need not fear. Our Lord tells us, “Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, facing crucifixion, He told Pilate that His Kingdom was not of this world. Jesus is the King of Heaven, the Lord of all Creation. And so we who have been washed and sealed in Baptism and given faith through His Word are citizens of His eternal Kingdom.

In this world, we are exiles and sojourners, strangers in a strange land, but that doesn’t mean we are homeless. Our home is the house of God, the new Jerusalem. Our Lord has gone before us to prepare a place for us, and the time we will spend there – eternity – is infinitely longer than our time in this world. The joys awaiting us there are infinitely better than anything this world has to offer. The peace there makes even the calmest moments in this life seem like chaos.

Being citizens of the Kingdom of God, we can look at the troubles in this world and still have comfort. As the sea roars and the powers of the heavens are shaken, we know that we stand on Mount Zion, the Mountain of the Lord which can never be moved.

What’s more, we can look at these troubles even with joy, as they mean the day of our Lord’s return is that much closer. Yes, we mourn the effects of sin in this world, and we lament the corruption that ruins the things of this life. But we do not lose hope, because our hope is not grounded in this world. Our hope is in God.

Each day that passes is another day closer to the Last Day. As things get darker, it just means that the Light is that much closer. As our bodies age and wear out, we’re that much closer to being given our new bodies, which will be like Christ’s glorious body. As our nation shakes and totters, it just means that we are all the nearer to dwelling in the Kingdom of Heaven, which will include all nations.

This is all certain because as Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Just like the various nations that rise and fall, eventually this entire creation’s time will end, and the Lord will dissolve it in fire. But even then, when the universe as we know it is destroyed and recreated, even then the words of God, the promises of our Lord, will remain, because our Lord will remain.

In Advent, we await that great and glorious Day of the Lord, even suffering through the night, for once that day dawns, darkness will be no more. We will live in the true oikoumenē, the Kingdom that will never end.

In Jesus name, amen.