

Time and time again throughout the history of humankind, societies rise and fall, leaving us pondering in fear whether the events in the world around us are signs of a greater disaster to come. After experiencing the destruction and horrors of World War II, Walter Miller wrote a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel called “A Canticle for Leibowitz” which is centered around an abbey of monks that arose from the devastation of a nuclear war. The novel spans centuries as we watch them slowly work to preserve knowledge after the collapse of civilization and then later use this knowledge to help society rebuild itself.

Sacred Scripture also speaks to this common human fear of the ending of the world. As we heard in that first reading, “Lo, the day is coming, blazing like an oven, when all the proud and evil doers will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire... But for you who fear my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays.” Sacred Scripture is clear that one day the world will definitively end in fire with the coming of the sun of justice.

Those who lived in Jesus’ time held the same fears as us, and they looked at the turmoil around them, wondering if Jesus’ presence among them meant that the end was near. Perhaps contrary to what we might expect, Jesus sought to calm, not heighten, their fears. He said, “See that you do not be deceived, for many will come in my name saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time has come.’ Do not follow them! When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for such things must happen first, but it will not immediately be the end.”

Over time, Christians came to understand more fully the truth that the world would end when Jesus, the true Son of Justice, comes again a second time in glory. So they waited in anticipation of this coming, looking for signs that the end was near. A few decades after Christ’s death and resurrection, Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans and the Temple was destroyed, making some think that surely the end was

near but as days stretched into months, nothing happened. A few centuries later, Rome was sacked, leading many to say “*sic transit gloria mundi*”, thus passes the glory of the world. Surely this meant that the end was near, but as months stretched into years, once again nothing happened!

In the face of this uncertainty, Christians were left pondering how they were called to live their lives as they waited for this coming which never seemed to arrive. In today’s second reading, Paul was speaking to the Thessalonians who were living within this very tension. In the opening part of his letter which we did not read, Paul confirmed to the Thessalonians that there will be a coming day of judgment and that they must continue to live upright and blameless lives. At the same time, he goes on to warn them that they should “not be too easily thrown into confusion or alarmed by any manifestation of the Spirit or any statement or any letter... suggesting that the day of the Lord has already arrived.” Instead, he says that they must follow the example of those who first preached the Gospel to them. “For we did not act in a disorderly way among you... on the contrary, in toil and drudgery, night and day we worked, so as to not burden any of you.”

At first glance, Paul’s words don’t seem to answer this burning question that we are facing, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. When contemplating the end of the world, especially when it seems imminent, there are a few common reactions. One, of course, is to hide away in fear. A second is to shut ourselves off from the world, seeing our participation in it as meaningless. A third is to begin condemning those around us who are living worldly lives.

Against all of these possible reactions, Paul urges them “in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and eat their own food,” saying that those who do not work should not eat. In other words, those who want to live in fear must face their fears and remain active in the world. Those who want to turn away from the world are

reminded that they must still remain in the world and work for its sanctification. Those who want to condemn the world are reminded that they must instead work side by side with those around them, in toil and drudgery through day and night, so that those around them might encounter Christ through the powerful example of their lives. In other words, God does not want us to sit around on our hands idly, waiting for Him to come again. Instead, He has called upon us to go out and labor in the fields of the world so that we might bring about a great harvest.

This truth is deepened by today's Gospel. Right after Jesus tells us to not worry about when the end of the world will come, He tells us that before that day arrives we will be forced to give testimony about Him to the world. "Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all of your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute." It is through this perseverance in proclaiming Christ's name despite all adversity that we will secure our lives and not a hair on our heads will be harmed.

At the end of "A Canticle for Leibowitz", the earth is once again facing nuclear annihilation and the abbey decides to send missionaries out into space to the colonized planets. As the nuclear explosions begin and their mission leads them out of this world, the last monk slips into the ship, murmuring "*sic transit mundus*", thus passes the world. In the end, as Christians we are not called to shrink away and hide when the world seems to be falling apart around us. Instead, we are called to continue to work hard and persevere in peace, knowing that God can use our example to bring those around us to salvation as well. In doing so, no matter where we are, we will build up around ourselves communities of faith that will strive to protect and preserve humanity until that glorious day when our Lord finally comes to call us home.