

“Be watchful! Be alert!” (Mk 13:33). We can be surprised at any moment. Two years ago on the Feast Day of St. Andrew, a 7.0 earthquake rocked Southcentral Alaska. 2000 years ago, the simple lives of several fishermen in Galilee were turned upside down. Jesus called Andrew, his brother Simon Peter and two others, James, and his brother John, to leave their nets behind and to follow him. Jesus invited and they responded immediately.

We have begun the season of advent and Jesus invites each of us to follow him. How will you respond? Saint Paul offers this advice. “Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9). To declare one’s faith in Jesus required great courage 2000 years ago in an age where Christians were often persecuted. Today, our religious freedom is under attack. To profess one’s faith in Jesus and to try to live out that faith, Christians are often subject to discrimination.

The Supreme Court made headlines this past week by overturning restrictions on church attendance amid New York State’s efforts to clamp down on the spread of the coronavirus. What were some of the issues? Businesses defined as “essential” had fewer or no restrictions. Religious services were considered non-essential. So, for example, a liquor store defined as essential could be open at full capacity, but a church deemed non-essential could not admit more than 10 persons. Justice Neil Gorsuch explained the majority opinion in favor of freedom of religion. “It is time — past time — to make plain that, while the pandemic poses many grave challenges, there is no world in which the Constitution tolerates color-coded executive edicts that reopen liquor stores and bike shops but shutter churches, synagogues and mosques.”ⁱ

In a time of great spiritual distress when many are losing their lives, religious worship is needed more than ever. Representatives from the Jewish and the Catholic faith came together to argue for the religious freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment. “Not only is there no evidence that the applicants have contributed to the spread of COVID–19 but there are many other less restrictive rules that could be adopted to minimize the risk to those attending religious services. Among other things, the maximum attendance at a religious service could be tied to the size of the church or synagogue ... even in a pandemic, the Constitution cannot be put away and forgotten. The restrictions at issue here, by effectively barring many from attending religious services, strike at the very heart of the First Amendment’s guarantee of religious liberty” the court wrote.ⁱⁱ

We need to take the virus seriously by doing what we can to wear masks, wash hands, and practice social distance, and limiting our own travel. Bishop Nicholas of Brooklyn added, “Our churches have not been the cause of any outbreaks. We have taken our legal battle this far because we should be considered essential, for what could be more essential than safely gathering in prayer in a time of pandemic.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Apostle Andrew was fully committed. His commitment to Jesus called for great sacrifice. Aside from his brother Peter, he left his family. He left his livelihood of fishing, and he embraced a life of learning at the feet of the master. In time, he gave his very life being crucified by the Romans in Greece on an X-shaped cross.

If we are faithful and true to our own calling, we can expect opposition as well. People are illogical, unreasonable, and often times openly hostile to religion. We always need to keep the cross of Christ before us, that we to may follow Jesus and if necessary, give all for the sake of the Gospel.

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/supreme-court-overturns-ny-church-restrictions-brooklyn-bishop-says-religion-essential-during-pandemic-99008

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.