

In 1961 a galaxy of great film stars came together to take part in a powerful Stanley Kramer film “Judgement at Nuremberg.” Only fifteen short years after the real trials took place, this film was made. Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, Marlene Dietrich, Maximilian Schell – who won an Oscar – Richard Widmark, Judy Garland and Montgomery Clift, all gave gripping performances to portray the tragedy of the Nazis in Germany, and to demonstrate how difficult it is to apportion guilt and to practise justice in times of tension, oppression and war.

Where does responsibility begin and end in the complex relationships of society, and in the chain of command in government ? How guilty are the bystanders ? How guilty the other nations who let Hitler get away with so much ? The film story shows how easy it can be for a good man to be drawn into the orbit of evil. As Spencer Tracy, the judge, says “If we were dealing here with evil monsters, the judgement would be easy. There would be no need for a trial. But we are dealing with human beings, sometimes with very good human beings.” The task of apportioning guilt in the midst of such overwhelming evil seems a difficult one, but in the end the presiding judge came to his judgement by asserting “the absolute value of a single human being.” The killing of hundreds, the killing of thousands began to be evil with the wrongful killing of one.

The judgement of Nuremberg stands over the whole world. In all our arguments and conflicts, in all our wars and vendettas, it is the tragic killing of one, of any one, which is the step too far. At the root of all our sorrows, all our troubles, is our callous disregard for the priceless importance of each single human being.

On this Holy Thursday night, we gather round the table of Jesus – a priceless human being. He was about to go out into the night, to face his own tragic end. Out into the darkness, and into the hands of men who did not care about him, or about what would happen to him.

At the table that night, Jesus demonstrates in a vivid and unforgettable way, the value of every single human being. Enough of words. Before speaking lovingly to his friends about their imminent parting and distress, and about the comforting of the Spirit, Jesus gets up from the table, and down on his knees, to wash the disciples’ feet.

What madness is this, that he – the Lord and Master – should turn the values of society upside down and make himself the servant of the servants ! No wonder Peter objects. It’s natural to object to things we don’t understand. So Jesus says, “Trust me. You will understand later. Let it be for now.” So Peter relents and allows Jesus to give us the most powerful demonstration of how to live life in this world.

Jesus sets himself to serve others in the smallest and most menial task of everyday life – to wash feet..... a gesture which in that place and time gave welcome and immediate refreshment of body to his friends. If little things mean a lot, then this least, this most insignificant action is the most meaningful of all. If “having servants” is a sign of a

person's prestige and importance in life, then what price the value of our life if the Lord has made himself our servant !

Back at the table, Jesus says, "This is my body, this is my blood." Every single being on the face of the earth says and feels those same words about the precious reality of their own lives. My body. My blood. This is me. I am precious. I am of immense value and purpose and meaning. No matter what happens to me, no matter how woeful or wasteful life may be, no matter how terrible or tragic it may become, this is my body, this is my blood. I count.

This feeling, this suspicion of my immortal value, is brought home to me at the Last Supper, when Jesus, about to be broken, gives himself to everyone, and for ever.

In this Last Supper we celebrate a death, Saint Paul tells us. A death which did not end in death, but in a risen life. A single, priceless, irreplaceable life. The life of Jesus, yes. And my life too. And that of each and every one of my neighbours. Single, priceless, irreplaceable.