

*In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway  
for our God!*

Something recently reminded me of the 1944 film *The Fighting Sullivans* (originally titled just *The Sullivans*). It commemorated the loss of five brothers who served in the USS Juneau – sunk in the slugfests between surface ships near Guadalcanal. It was against Navy policy that siblings should serve on the same ships but the Sullivans insisted and the luck of the Irish ran out. The film takes us back to the birth and baptisms of each boy in Waterloo, Iowa. Their father was a railroad freight conductor. We are carried along by episodes during their boyhood and early adult years – recalling their solidarity – a kind of “all for one and one for all” attitude. One scene shows them gathering upon a water tower platform beside the railroad waving to their father as he boards his caboose to commence his work.

And so it goes – even fist fights with bullies and admonitions for better behavior from their Catholic pastor. And then one Sunday (which I recall): Pearl Harbor! – and the boys all enlist together and within only months the Juneau went down leaving only ten survivors. Which is where the film’s audience “falls apart”. The scene follows where Ward Bond as a naval officer comes to the Sullivan home one morning. The family is up – the father getting ready for work. The mother welcomes Bond into their parlor. It’s clear he has a message. The father senses what it is and asks: “Which one?” And Ward Bond (and I assume he had to redo this scene several times) pauses and says: “All five.” I have seen grown men in the audience break into tears. When I was studying in Rome in the early 1950’s I watched the film a second time in a parish hall full of Italian mothers. When that scene happened – the floor of that hall literally began to flow with tears – and the air became loud with moans and no! no! no!.

Now in order to close the film on a positive note (a positive note??) the producers’ final scene shows the five brothers in their naval uniforms alive in a ghostly way ascending toward a distant light we assume is heaven – and waving goodbye. It doesn’t work. And in our day it’s unlikely that any such happily-ever-after ending would work. For judging by the global media the systems, the values of our world seem to be deconstructing. As a poet has said: *Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.* Which makes me want to return to the scene played *before* that ghostly goodbye.

It shows the father going off (after Bond’s visit) to work as on any other day. He climbs up to the platform of his caboose and as the freight train pulls away he looks up to the water tower from which the boys *used to* wish him goodbye. Far from imagining his sons on their way to an afterlife in heaven, the look on the father’s face (played by Thomas Mitchell) is dubious, quizzical, like asking “why?” The tragedy has begun to make him *think, interrogate* his store of beliefs – which is where authentic philosophy and theology *begin*. It’s a good place to be, without our waiting for tragedies to strike, because our beliefs over time can go stale, become rote and if now in the history of the world it isn’t a time for us to *think, to ponder, to wonder* instead of to *argue* our way back into community, when will it ever be?

***Geoff Wood***