

by Ted Giese

Writer/director Christopher Nolan has done for the WWII evacuation of Dunkerque, France (code-named Operation Dynamo) what Steven Spielberg did for the Allied D-Day amphibious landing in Normandy, France (codenamed Operation Neptune). But where Spielberg's 1989 film *Saving Private Ryan* left the French beach and the English Channel to tell a more conventional war-genre narrative, *Dunkirk* stays on the beach and in the beleaguered English Channel—making *Dunkirk* a more neatly-told story and, by order of magnitude, a more claustrophobic and relentlessly intense film. And Nolan does this without an R-rating, making *Dunkirk* a much more accessible film for a wider audience.

Dunkirk details the English evacuation of its expeditionary force from continental Europe after an unexpected, aggressive, and successful push from the Nazi army as its Panzer division repeated blitzkrieg pinned British and French ground troops against the English Channel on the sandy beaches of Dunkirk, France. While Britain, France, and New Zealand had declared war against Germany following the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 3, 1939, not a lot happened in the first months of the war. Then on May 10, 1940 the English and Allies deployed an expeditionary force. By May 20 everything was falling apart as the force was routed and bottled up at Dunkirk.

In telling the story of Dunkirk, Nolan has crafted an extraordinarily intense and at times unnerving film about a military catastrophe which against all odds was snatched out of the fires of total defeat. Part of his strategy to keep viewers on the edge of their seats is the disorienting way in which the narrative develops. While chronological, the film is not precisely linear—at least not in a conventional way. Three separate narrative threads weave together into a single epic tapestry—but each thread covers events that would have

taken different lengths of time to chronologically unfold. Essentially, it's like this: imagine three men arriving at an intersection—one walking, one on a bike, and the other driving a car. They each arrive at the same point at the same moment, but it took longer for the man to walk there, less time for the man on the bike, and even less time for the man in the car. Now intercut these three stories: at first the impression is they are each happening simultaneously, particularly if their respective story is told in equal parts. This is what viewers get with *Dunkirk*: a temporal disruption to the natural unfolding of time that heightens the tension and drama.

The three narrative threads Nolan takes up to tell the evacuation story are land, sea, and air. The story that begins on land with 400,000-plus stranded ground troops unfolds over a one-week timeframe. The sea-based story largely focuses on the conscripted British personal and commercial boats deployed across the English Channel to ferry soldiers to larger ships or back to Britain directly. This narrative thread unfolds over a one-day time frame. Meanwhile, the story that takes place in the air over the English Channel and the beaches of Dunkirk unfolds over a one-hour time frame. Each narrative thread receives about the same screen time yet are intercut in such a way that it takes some time for the audience to understand just how everything is unfolding.

The land narrative revolves around fictional young British private named Tommy, who works determinedly to get off the beach and back to England while most of the other soldiers await rescue patiently. His efforts could best be summed up with the phrase “two steps forward, one step back.” The drama from the land point of view comes from the tested patience of the ground forces as they have to wait while exposed to enemy air attacks. Christian viewers may be reminded of the words of St. Peter: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing



that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). The British expeditionary force is essentially being asked to trust that rescue is coming no matter how bleak the situation might look.

The narrative of their rescue by sea is centred on a small pleasure vessel captained by Mr. Dawson, his teenage son Peter, and Peter's friend George. While some vessels were commandeered by the Royal Navy and manned by sailors, many others like this fictional boat were piloted by their owner/operators. By sticking to the historical details, primarily the young age of most of the British expeditionary force soldiers, Nolan ends up highlighting a striking feature of this rescue. The men who came to the aid of the soldiers by sea are older and some younger teenage boys. The image of the fathers and grandfathers of Britain rescuing their sons is moving and the kind of thing rarely witnessed in films today.

Told with little dialogue, Nolan's *Dunkirk* still manages to emphasize the interactions, both positive and sometimes negative, between men under stress on the battle field. For the Christian viewer, what emerges especially is a meditation on the Fifth Commandment:

You shall not murder. What does this mean? We should fear and love

God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbour in his body, but *help and support him in every physical need (emphasis added)*.

Apart from the Nazi Luftwaffe pilots, no German soldiers are visible—only the sporadic and opportunistic gunfire of an enemy army consistently outside the cinematographer’s frame. This adds to the mounting suspense and makes *Dunkirk* less about the German attackers and more about the evacuation and rescue. Although the film depicts intermittent acts of selfishness and selfish self-preservation by some soldiers, overall the film is about rising to meet the obligations of the Fifth Commandment—men, both military and civilian, risking their lives to save the lives of others. For example, when Mr. Dawson, Peter and George rescue their first stranded soldier, he selfishly wants them to take him, and him alone, back to Britain. Instead they carefully distract and contain the belligerent soldier to rescue additional soldiers.

The rescue narrative from the air also shows this high degree of willingness towards self-sacrifice. Nolan eventually homes in on a single Royal Air Force Spitfire pilot, Farrier, who works to “help and support his neighbour in every physical need” by continuing to engage the enemy, even when he could have turned back to England for mechanical reasons.

In a year awash with big budget super heroes and sci-fi, *Dunkirk*

provides a unique, intense film-going experience. It’s commitment to detail and near flawless execution makes it one of the best war films to date, and puts it into contention for the upcoming awards season. The freshness of Nolan’s narrative approach will keep viewers on the edge of their seats and stay with them after they leave the theatre. The three threads of the narrative start reorganizing in the mind and act like a memory—a memory that honours the hour in the air, the day at sea, and the week on land for all those involved at Dunkirk. Even though the story

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is told primarily with fictional characters, Nolan manages to honour the real men (and some women nurses) caught up in the events of the WWII evacuation in a candid and cathartic way befitting of their sacrifices.

A word of warning: while the film is rated PG in Canada, it can’t be stressed enough that this film is an intense experience, especially if viewed in IMAX. People suffering with anxiety, claustrophobia, fears of water or drowning, and those who generally have a hard time with war films will want to think long and hard before attending *Dunkirk*. The film will likely be far too challenging for small children and sensitive children entering their teenage years.

Rev. Ted Giese is associate pastor of Mount Olive Lutheran Church (Regina, Saskatchewan). He is a contributor to Reformation Rush Hour on KFUO AM Radio, *The Canadian Lutheran*, and the *LCMS Reporter*, as well as movie reviewer for the “Issues, Etc.” radio program.

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TRANSITIONS

Rev. Gilvan de Azevedo, Emeritus, Windsor, Ontario to Bethel Lutheran Church, Kitchener, Ontario. (Installation to be determined at a later date.)

Rev. Peter Van Katwyk, Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Red Deer, Alberta to Zion Lutheran Church, Prince George, B.C. and Vanderhoof Lutheran Church, Vanderhoof, B.C. (Installation to be determined at a later date.)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Rev. Esko Murto of St. Catherines, Ontario has successfully completed the requirements of the Pastoral Colloquy Program for Lutheran Church-Canada and is, therefore, eligible for a call in LCC.