

Meditation for deep church.2

2. Meditation Two: Presence in absence and absence through presence

I have touched on the theme of absence and presence in the Old Testament, I want to turn now to how we experience absence and presence in our everyday life. I do this because reflecting on the absence and presence of God can seem a very abstract, distant kind of thing. Yet we experience absence and presence in relation to each other and the world around us in a whole host of different ways, and our personal experiences of absence and presence are analogous to or have parallels with how God is absent and present to us.

To help us think through the theme of absence and presence I will focus on two very different artworks – some sculptures by the contemporary artist Rachel Whiteread and the wax figures of Madam Tussauds. An odd coupling, but each, in very different ways represents a particular take on our theme of absence and presence.

a) Rachel Whiteread

Before looking at Rachel Whiteread's sculptures it is worth pausing and thinking about what the point of art is – why art? There are many possible responses to this question but one response was given by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger who suggested that art, at its most basic level, helps us notice the world around us. Art brings things to consciousness that we otherwise don't see; that is to say, it helps us attend to what is before us. By sticking a frame around something or putting it in a gallery the artist says: 'look at this, don't ignore it'. And so a picture of a bowl of fruit or some flowers or a portrait makes us attend to these everyday things in a more considered way and may even shed new light on

them, help us see something we have never noticed before or help us appreciate them in a new way. And in doing so art opens up our horizons, it helps us re-imagine the world. One of most extreme versions of that was Marcel Duchamp who famously put a men's urinal in a gallery, and entitled is *Fountain*.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Another example is Damien Hirst's shark (Officially titled 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living') – these don't look like art in

the traditional sense but they do make us look again at things we ordinarily either don't think about or look at in negative ways.

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The sculptures of Rachel Whiteread need to be approached in a similar way to the work of Duchamp or Hirst. Unlike Hirst and Duchamp, much of her sculpture has an obvious beauty and poignancy, but what it does is draw our attention to things we don't ordinarily notice or pay attention to.



The main focus of her work is making moulds of 'negative space'. You can see here a number of examples of her work. She has moulded the space behind a set of books, or the underneath of a dressing room table and chair, or in one of her most famous pieces, she made a concrete cast of the inside of a house (that was latter demolished).



All the objects she moulds the space around are everyday, mundane things: baths, stairs, tables, beds, book shelves etc. But precisely because we use them everyday, we never take much notice of them. That is, until they are gone. What Whiteread does is create memorials of the everyday through revealing to us their absence.



In memorialising the imprint of our ordinary world her work speaks of the many aspects of everyday human life that we over look and the ways in which we only begin to pay attention to certain things or people in their absence. Whiteread draws our attention to things that are absent to us by their constant, unobtrusive presence.. These objects are so familiar that they disappear from view. They are hidden by broad daylight. By removing them and leaving their trace, memorialising their absence, Whiteread brings them to consciousness again. She makes us notice them by framing their absence. In so doing, Whiteread reminds us to see the spouse we over-look, the colleague we never pass the time of day with, the friend we take for granted, the simple beauty of the bath we lie in.



b) Madam Tussauds

If some things disappear from view because we are over-familiar with them then the equal and opposite is also true. Some people or things can appear more present, receive more attention precisely because they are unfamiliar or distant to us. In short, if the familiar is made present to us through being made absent, the unfamiliar, what is strange and absent to us is made known by being made present.

We read *Hello* and watch programmes about celebrities because it makes present to us those who we will never meet or who live in a different world to us. We wonder at pictures of distant planets we cannot see with the naked eye or are fascinated by documentaries about the deep sea and the creatures who occupy it. Such pictures and programmes make present to us what is distant and strange.

I have often wondered why Madam Tussauds is such a long lasting and popular tourist attraction. I think its appeal lies in precisely the way in which the waxwork figures make present to us celebrities and historical figures who are ordinarily absent from us. The paradox is that their presence in the form of a waxwork dummy only serves to emphasise our distance from them and their absence to us.



(taken from random Bloggers on the internet)



The problem for us is that in contemporary culture that which is absent – celebrities, exotic locations, luxury goods – can feel more present to us than the reality of our everyday life. We give more attention to what celebrities are doing than we do to what our friends and family are doing. We invest more time and energy in obtaining the latest gadget than in getting the most from what we already have. The image becomes an idol that captivates our attention and we see it as more important, more significant than our immediate relations. We feel we know the distant celebrity better than our neighbour. The truth is, we don't really know either: we don't know the star because we cannot have a personal relationship with them and we don't know our neighbour because we are too distracted to pay them attention.

At root, our problem is that we over-value what is absent and undervalue what is already present. A central part of being a Christian is learning to value or love things properly and the primary way in which we do this is by learning to love God first. Understanding how God is present and absent to us helps us understand and love God.

c) The absent presence and present absence of God

One of the things I struggle with and I think it is a common problem, is the way in which God often feels absent and yet I know by faith, God is present. I want to

suggest that God is made present through his absence and is often, paradoxically, made absent through his presence. Let me explain.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection is unique, it is exceptional and out of the ordinary. In addition to its exceptional nature it occurred a long time ago in a distant land and a foreign culture. Like a celebrity-watcher reading *Hello* or a visitor to Madam Tussauds, we read the Bible conscious of how different our life is from the one we read about. We read the Bible for the same reason that we take photos on holiday, but not of our journey to work, or make a video of a special event but not of us watching TV: we require such an account in order to make what is distant or irregular or exceptional present to us. Similarly, it is Christ's absence from us that is constitutive of how he is most often present to us. His physical absence, his historical distance, his risen and ascended status is precisely what makes us to pay attention to his life and death more closely. It is because his life and ministry feels strange and distant from our own experience, because we see by faith and not by sight, that we are motivated to learn more about him – or we should be!

Yet there is an equal and opposite dynamic as well. The presence of God in creation mostly goes unnoticed and unseen, yet it is God who sustains the structure of the cosmos and enables the very possibility of my life-giving breath. We are mostly blind to the ways in which God, through the Spirit, is present to us. We take for granted the miracle of life. Yet the Spirit is like the cement which keeps our house and home in one piece: always there, but never noticed. Such things as cement, air, earth and gravity are absent to us by their constant, unobtrusive presence. These things are so familiar that they disappear from view. As the theologian Alan Lewis put it: *'Faith's problem...is not that God is so far from us as to be unknowable, but so close to us as to go unrecognised.'*¹

As Whiteread's sculptures suggest, it is often only when something or someone leaves us that we notice them. We come to understand the parent who has died, we feel closer to the friend or spouse who goes away, we miss the tree that is cut down. Likewise, God draws away from us in order that we might attend to our need of God more closely. This drawing away may take the form of a time of trial or difficulty or it may be through our own sin when we withdraw from God and in feeling our absence from God we realise afresh are need for God.

So the paradox is this: what we are familiar with through the Gospel narratives – namely the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – is really absent from or distant to us, yet what is present to us – namely, the presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit – is unfamiliar and often goes unnoticed.

Reflection point:

I invite you to pray that God might reveal to you the people or things which you don't pay attention to but which God is calling you to give time to and at the same time, to reveal to you those things you invest time, energy or money in but which distract you from what is really important in life.

¹ Alan Lewis, *Between Cross & Resurrection*, p. 250.