

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

30th May 2020

The Revd Erna Stevenson



I first saw this sculpture in 2012 when the URC Synod Ministers' Spring School was held in Northern Ireland. During our stay at the Corrymeela Centre in Ballycastle we had the opportunity to visit Derry/Londonderry and see some of the places particularly affected by the 'troubles'. It was a very emotional day, we were deeply touched by the stories of people who lived through the fearful and often tragic events of those years.

And after all that we came upon the shining bronze statues of these two men roughly 2 metres apart reaching out to each other from two sides of the divide. The sculpture is the work of local artist Maurice Harron and it was unveiled in 1992. I still remember very clearly how much I was moved by it. Unfortunately, our visit to the city was a sad day in more than one sense. It was pouring with rain, so trying to manage handbags and umbrellas and trying to make notes all at the same time meant I couldn't take any pictures. I am very grateful to Dr Martin Melaugh from Ulster University, who has kindly given me permission to use his photo from the internet.

The sculpture is about coming together, it's about touch, or a near touch, symbolising the effort of overcoming a situation, when this touch had not been not possible. It was a hopeful sign of healing and reconciliation and showed that beyond political decisions, real healing

and reconciliation would only come about when individual men and women were able to reach out and hold hands in solidarity.

I was reminded of it now because, over the last couple of months, due to the COVID 19 pandemic, temporarily we have all become untouchable. Do you remember, how even before the Lockdown, we had to stop shaking hands? And although we are now beginning to look forward to the easing of our separation, real handshakes seem to be a long-long way away.

Yet this sculpture is teaching us the art of reaching out, bridging the divide and 'touching' each other in friendship and understanding, in kindness and compassion without *actually* touching each other. There is a great creative energy between those almost touching hands, as one is offered in the act of blessing, while the other is open, ready to receive the blessing. Together they echo and take forward the near touch of Michelangelo's Creation painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican. We have received God's rich blessings, let us pass them on joyfully in the Spirit of Pentecost by whatever means we are allowed to do it.