**WEEK OF CHRISTIAN UNITY 18th January 2025**

We stand here together today before Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ to try to restore the divisions in His Body, the Church. In the Gospel of John chapter 17 He prays for the unity of his disciples with the words “that they may be one”. The reality of course is that in the East we, his followers, have been divided since the 11th century and in the West from the Reformation. So we stand in weakness before Him having manifestly failed to remain as one but perhaps we can find some consolation in what he taught us. In one of his parables in Matthew chapter 13 Christ tells the story of a farmer who sows good seed in his field but while everybody is asleep an enemy comes secretly, sows weeds among the wheat and goes away. The weeds soon appear with the good seed. The farmer tells the servants that an enemy has done this but they should not gather the weeds as they wish to do for fear of uprooting the wheat with them but to wait till harvest time when he will instruct the reapers to gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burnt before gathering the wheat into his barn. In his explanation of the parable the Lord explains that the person who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, that is himself. The field is the world and the good seed are the children of the Kingdom while the weeds are the children of the evil one sown by the devil. There is a day of reckoning at the end of the age when the angels will come to “collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers” to be thrown into the furnace of fire. “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father”.

St Paul talks to God about his weakness but the Lord responds, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness”. Given these reminders, we do not despair of our fractured unity. On the other side of the garden stand the Houses of St Gregory and his sister St Macrina and on the right-hand side of the church The House of St Theosevia. All three of these properties were purchased by an emigré couple Nicolas and Militza Zernov with the support both spiritual and financial of many friends across the churches who shared a common vision of the restoration of the Unity of the Church. Militza told me in the 1990s just before her death of how her husband had on his arrival in the UK first reacted to the other Christian churches here as heretics. However, on getting to know individuals in theses churches and observing the depth and intensity of their spiritual lives he had renounced his bigotry and entered into discussions with members of the churches with a view to restoring unity. One of the fruits of this dialogue was the foundation of a society which set about bringing together the Orthodox Church and the Church of England called the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, the respective saints of Britain and Russia. In nearly 100 years since its foundation the Society has worked tirelessly to reunite the churches. It is based across the lawn and holds regular meetings and conferences to continue this vision of reunification.

This division both between our churches and indeed within them challenges us to love not only those of our own tradition but those of other traditions and also of other religions. The first visitors to Christ were supposedly Zoroastrians. Only when we have learned to respect those of different views and to pray the words of the late Metropolitan Kallistos, “Dare we hope for the salvation of all” can we move forward in our dialogue together.