

Readings: *Isaiah 7: 10 – 14 & 8: 10; Ps. 39(40): 9 – 11; Hebrews 10: 4 – 10; Luke 1: 26 – 38.*

One of the dates taken for granted in our global online world is January 1st – New Year’s Day – but for hundreds of years different Christian communities began their years on different days, as different religious groups do today. Christmas Day, March 1st, and Easter Day were all possible starting points. In British territories (including the American colonies) it was only in 1752 that January 1st was adopted. Before that the new year began on today’s feast, March 25th.

From the second century some Christian teachers believed that Christ died on this date; in the early fifth century Saint Augustine refers to a belief that it was the day of Christ’s conception, and other teachers held that the creation of the world also occurred on this date. All this, we know, is imaginative speculation rather than history or science. *(Although, as a curious aside to British readers, it does explain the beginning of our financial year on 6th April – ‘Old Lady Day’!)*

But underlying all these varying dates is the idea of a new beginning – in Creation, Incarnation and Redemption.

Today’s celebration of the Annunciation of the Lord marks the decisive moment when the divine plan for the salvation of the human race, made from all eternity, took the form of willing co-operation between God and the chosen representative of our race – the virgin Mary of Nazareth. It is a moment which looks back to the Creation, when God’s plan began to be in time and space, and forward to the Redemption gained for us by the death of the Son of God on Calvary.

The Annunciation – or, as it was called in Medieval England, the Salutation – was, after the Crucifixion, the event most frequently represented in art, and hinged panels showing the two events were a common aid to people’s devotion.

This year the Annunciation falls in the middle of Lent – the season in which we prepare for the celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ. So we may contemplate these two events, the beginning and the end of our Lord’s earthly life, in the company of his mother, asking God in the words of the prayer which ends the Angelus, that, *“as we have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by his cross and passion we may be brought to the glory of his resurrection”*. A new beginning indeed!