

Readings: *Genesis 3: 9 – 15, 20; Ps. 97(98): 1 – 5; Ephesians 1: 3 – 6, 11, 12; Luke 1: 26 – 38.*

I know – as you do – that a theologically illiterate world confuses the Immaculate Conception with the Virginal Conception of Jesus, but we celebrate his conception on 25th March, the feast of the Annunciation. Today – nine months before her birthday on 8th September – the Church celebrates the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Preachers often point to this or that point in the history of Israel and the Church as ‘the beginning of our salvation’ – and there are arguments in favour of each of them. But the readings for today’s Solemnity point back before all that history to ‘a time before time’. In the reading from Genesis we learn that God’s immediate response to the Adam and Eve’s sin was to promise that Eve’s offspring will crush the serpent’s head. Statues of Our Lady sometimes depict this promise by showing her infant son’s foot placed on hers, and both pressing down on the serpent’s head. The New Testament reading takes us further: it speaks of a divine purpose, established *before the world was made*. Christ, who is the *offspring* of Eve, is the centre point of this divine plan. God the Father *chose us in him to be for his greater glory the people who would put their hopes in Christ*. This divine choice began with Abraham and his descendants and continued through the history of Israel until (as the verses which follow our reading make clear) it includes the gentiles to whom the epistle is written.

And at the heart of the list of those *chosen in Christ* stands Mary, *chosen before the world was made* to be the human mother of that *offspring* of Eve, who was, by his death and resurrection, to crush the serpent’s head.

In the Gospel reading Gabriel greets Mary: *Rejoice, so highly favoured! The Lord is with you*, and tells her that she has *found favour with God*. He has chosen, created, called and prepared her for the unique vocation of bearing the Saviour. And all that has been made possible by the work of her Son – work which in our world of time lies in the future, but in the mind of God is eternally present, so that we could equally say at the moment of Mary’s conception that her salvation and ours have been accomplished, are being accomplished, and will be accomplished.

Today’s Solemnity celebrates that divine act of choice and salvation in Christ.