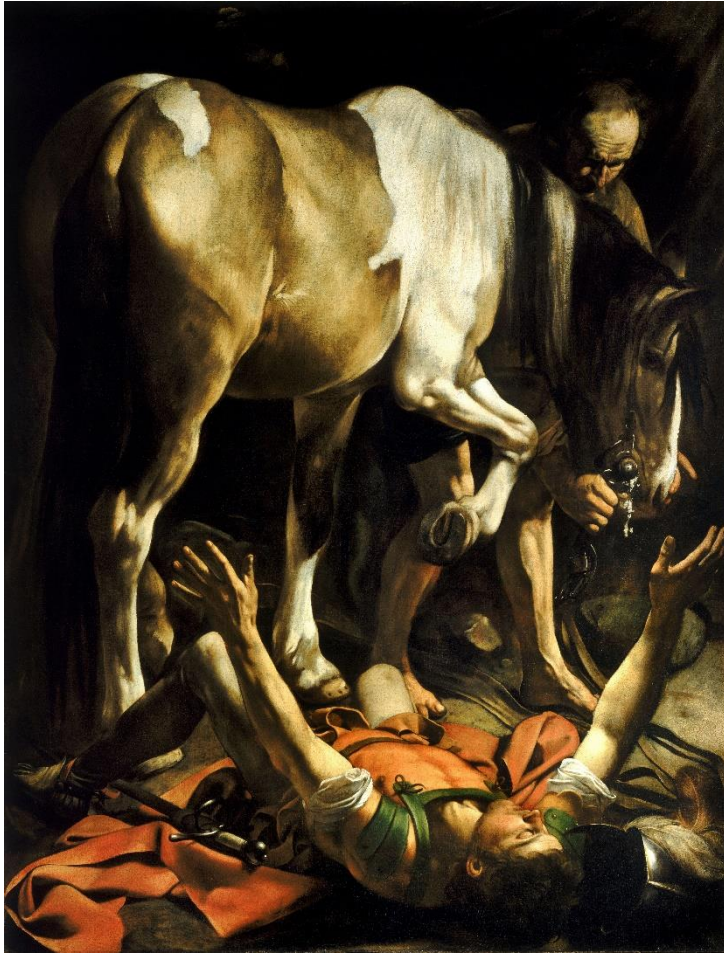


**Monday 25<sup>th</sup> January 2021**

**The Feast of the Conversion of St Paul.**

**Acts 9:1-22 or Acts 22:3-6**

There is a choice of readings today, both accounts of the conversion of Saul, (who is better known to us as St Paul) on the road to Damascus. His experience has led to the phrase “Damascus Road conversion” for someone who receives a sudden insight and understanding



to something, usually (but not always) faith. This painting by Caravaggio can help us enter into the meaning for us and our life of faith as well as learn something about the man who once persecuted Christ's followers.

Caravaggio is famous for *chiaroscuro*, contrasting light and dark, in his work. It particularly highlights the light of Christ against the darkness of sin. Look at how the light in the middle of the picture streaks down through the horse's mane to the arm and then the face of Saul, lying flat on the ground. This is the light of Christ,

who calls Saul out of the darkness of sin and hatred, into His light. So dramatic is the change that Saul is blinded – and becomes dependant on others' help for a few days. Lying on the ground with his arms outstretched like an infant, it is as if he has been reborn and must learn everything anew. It also indicates that as Paul, the Christian preacher, he would be totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit in his missionary work and life as a Christian. We are equally dependent upon the Holy Spirit in our life of faith, who pours out His grace to us as and when we ask.

The prominence of the horse is another key to the dependence that Saul/Paul will have on the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, horses are seen as symbols of worldly strength, e.g. Psalm 33, which says that “a war horse is a vain hope for victory”, and Isaiah proclaimed woe for those who relied on horses (Isaiah 31:1). From now on, Saul will have to rely on God alone,

as indicated by the bit and bridle which catches the light above Saul/Paul's hand. A bit and bridle allows men, weaker than a horse to command and the horse will obey. Again in the Psalms we read, "be not like the horse or the mule without understanding which ... must be curbed with bit and bridle.... But steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the Lord." (Ps. 32). St Paul will be led not by coercion, but by Christ's love. We too are guided by that same love which we received in Baptism through the Holy Spirit. St Paul's "hymn to of love" (I Cor. 13) so often read at weddings, is not just about romantic love but about the fact that as God *is* love (I Jn. 4:7), the only way to live in Christ is to live in His love.

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