

**Sermon for the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ: Christmas Day
December 24, 2019**

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: Isaiah 9:2–4, 6–7; Psalm 96:1–4, 11–12; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–20**

Sixteen days and one hundred-fifty years ago, the first services in the first Church of St. Mary the Virgin, on the other side of what was then Long Acre Square, at 228 West Forty-fifth Street, were celebrated. Our present church home opened sixteen days and one-hundred twenty-five years ago. This evening we gather for the one hundred fiftieth celebration of Christmas at Saint Mary's.

In both our parish's church homes, the celebrant on Christmas Day in 1870 and in 1895 was the founding rector, Thomas McKee Brown. He died after a short illness, pneumonia, in the rectory in the early hours of December 19, 1898. He was rector for twenty-eight years and only fifty-seven years-old. He was buried in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. His memorial is across from the pulpit. It was dedicated on December 19, 1900.¹

¹ Newbury Frost Read, *The Story of St. Mary's: The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York City, 1868–1931* (New York, 1931),

There is a moving account of Brown's sickness and death in the January 1899 issue of *The Arrow*, a parish newsletter published at that time—you can read it all in the archives section of the parish webpage.²

On Sunday, December 11, 1898, Father Brown was not well, but he still sang the Solemn Mass in the morning and “made,” the account says, “a vigorous appeal to the congregation for their support in the several works of the Parish.” The “wintery and dangerous” weather did not keep him away from the Annual Meeting of the Men's Club on Tuesday night, December 13. By the time he returned to the rectory that night, it was clear that he had pneumonia and was gravely ill. He was greatly loved. Ever since, the flowers on the high altar at Christmas have been in his memory.

There were many tributes to him. Haley Fiske, the great lay leader of Saint Mary's of that generation and whose memorial is not far from Father Brown's, made three points about the founder's character. First, Father Brown was a person of courage, moral and physical—it helped make him a leader and a progressive within the church community. Second, he had tact, he knew how to put across his point of view without offense, and

² *The Arrow*, vol. 8, num. 1, January 1899, 4–6.

third, he had a magnetic personality, which he used in service of the gospel.³

I've read that account of his death quite a few times over the years but reading it at the Noonday Office before the 12:10 Mass on Thursday, these words from Brown's last address spoke to me. (This is very much the language of that time.) It says, "he made a most earnest address, commending the members for their faithfulness, and urging them to remain constant to the Cause of the Woman and Child"—"the Cause"—Capital "C"—"of the Woman"—capital "W"—"and Child"—capital "C." And what may we say is the "Cause of the Woman and the Child"? In Luke, Jesus' cause would be, as he explained to those who complained when he entered the house of a tax collector to stay with him, that, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."⁴

In Luke, Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth. The annunciation to Mary happens there. But the birth of Jesus, the angels to the shepherds, and the shepherds to Mary, Joseph, and child all happen in—or by—Bethlehem.

³ *In Memory of the Rev. Thomas McKee Brown, M.A., Pastor, Teacher, Priest* (New York: E. & J.B. Young & Co., 1899), 87–88.

⁴ Luke 19:7.

A star is not a part of Luke's story, nor are the astrologers from the east with gifts, or King Herod with his chief priest, his scribes, and later his soldiers. The rulers of this world aren't after the child in Luke. These stories all belong to Matthew.

In Luke, religious leaders are not happy with Jesus' healing and his teaching, but it is only during his last days in Jerusalem that these leaders begin to seek to kill him.⁵ That happens much earlier in Mark, Matthew, and also in John,⁶ where the leaders, seeing the crowds with Jesus, aren't sure they can do anything to stop him because, they say, "The world has gone after him."⁷ They were right. They couldn't stop him: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."⁸

It's as if Luke's Jesus is holding a door open, as it were, for people to find their way to him, to the Father, and to the Spirit—to realize that God is seeking them. It is in Luke, that the door to Paradise is even open for the crucified wrongdoer, the one who asked the crucified

⁵ Luke 19:47.

⁶ Mark 3:6; Matthew 12:14; John 5:18.

⁷ John 12:19.

⁸ Luke 7:22.

Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into his kingdom.⁹ It's worth noting that this wrongdoer is the only person in Luke who calls Jesus by his name—Jesus, that is, “The Lord is Help—or Salvation.”¹⁰ Where ever we are in our journeys in this life, the door, as were, remains open.

One last thing. A great many of the words, like a great deal of the music, that we hear and sing tonight are more than familiar. They are words and sounds of truth and power. Don't fight them. Enter them. I hope that tonight there will be many moments when we find ourselves, in the words of one of Charles Wesley's hymns, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”¹¹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁹ Luke 23:39–43.

¹⁰ R.C. Cousland, “The Gospel According to Matthew,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1748, n. 1:1.

¹¹ *The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), no. 657.