

**READINGS FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE
OF ANDY WILLIAMS**

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes

April 27, 2016

Reading 1: *God's Grandeur*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Reading 2: The Beatitudes, from the Gospel of Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit;	the reign of heaven is theirs.
Blessed are those in mourning;	they will be consoled.
Blessed are those who are gentle;	they will inherit the land.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice;	they will have their fill.
Blessed are those who show mercy to others;	they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are those whose hearts are clean;	they will see God.
Blessed are those who work for peace;	they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those persecuted because of their struggle for justice;	the reign of heaven is theirs.

Homily by Anne Heck

It is good to be together here today, to remember, honor, and celebrate the blessing that Andy was to Joanna, to his family and friends, and even to those of us who knew him mainly through her.

One of the things we do for each other is to acknowledge, and even try to name, the blessing that such people are for us. We might even express it in terms of a “beatitude.”

I was waiting for our service to begin and looking over Kate’s lovely drawing of her father on the cover of our worship aid, when I found myself thinking, “Blessed are they who gaze in wonder at the night sky.” Maybe it could be finished off with something like “for they shall never be satisfied with a too-small god.”

The Beatitudes are the first public words we hear from Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, undoubtedly because they are the best expression of Jesus’s approach to the world—his starting point, and the foundation for his life and teaching. Jesus looks out at the world and sees blessings; he names the kinds of people who are blessings.

As a good Jew, Jesus was well acquainted with what we might call the Hebrew “beatitudes.” Many of the psalms start with, or include, such phrases:

Blessed are they who fear God and walk in God’s ways (128: 1);

Blessed are those who put their trust in God (2:11);

Blessed are they who live in your house, ever singing your praise (84:4);

Blessed are they who consider the poor (41:1);

Blessed are those whose way is blameless (119:1)

It is a beautiful tradition, lifting up for praise shining examples of Jewish life well lived. But what strikes me is how Jesus expands this tradition to embrace less obvious objects for our admiration. Jesus’s beatitudes draw attention to the courage and dignity of people who are struggling, or who tend to be overlooked because of their lowly status or quiet ways: the poor in spirit, people in mourning, the meek (“gentle” in our translation), people who yearn for justice that is still out of reach, the merciful, the pure of heart, peacemakers, even (maybe especially) the persecuted. There is something very real-life about Jesus’s words, spoken to people in the trenches.

Another thing that strikes me is that Jesus is not speaking to a congregation in a synagogue. He is speaking on a hillside, under a wide-open sky. Who was Jesus looking upon as he spoke? Matthew tells us that Jesus’s fame had already spread beyond Galilee and Judea, to Syria, and across the Jordan River—into Gentile territory.

So the crowds were quite a mix of Jews, Gentiles, and “god-fearers,” that is, people who were attracted to the God of the Jews, but not ready to make the leap of conversion. In terms of religious commitment, Jesus’ audience probably included the strictly observant, the disaffected, the skeptical, and the curious.

As Jesus gazed on this mixed crowd, he undoubtedly also saw people who were hurting, people who were struggling to survive or to make life better for themselves and others, and people whose efforts seemed futile, or went unappreciated. All these people he wanted to embrace with his “beatitudes.”

Jesus was not naïve. Hungering and thirsting for justice is an ongoing reality. Working for peace never ends. Occasions calling for mercy are always with us. Persecution was a reality too well known to Matthew’s community, and also too well known in our own times. Mourning and grieving come to all of us. The world continues, as the poet Hopkins

says, to be *bleared, smeared with toil* . . . [to] *wear man’s smudge and share man’s smell*.

Nonetheless, as Jesus, gazes out on the crowd, he sees something utterly precious—what Hopkins calls *the dearest freshness deep down things*. Jesus draws our attention to the goodness that too often lies unnoticed beneath the smudge and smell of human struggles and shortcomings.

In this Easter season of the year, when we trace the trajectory of Jesus’s life and mission, we are reminded that in time we, too, like Jesus—and like Andy—will make our return to a God who watches over us, with *warm breast and ah! bright wings*.