Homily:  Luke 6:27-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Who remembers the movie Help! and Beatlemania? Those scenes of the Beatles running away from their hysterical fans, who all wanted something from John, Paul, George and Ringo, are pretty well fixed in the memories of those of us who were in our teens at the time. That mania was created from a combination of talent, practice and planning, and some excellent marketing strategy.

But it is the ‘Jesus mania’ as described in Luke’s gospel that we are considering today. This scene probably didn’t happen exactly as described, quite likely both Matthew and Luke had read a collection of Jesus’ sayings, gathered by many people at different times and places. And they took those sayings and put them into one grand sermon.

There must have been many open air gatherings, with people coming from far and wide, from all over Judea, from Jerusalem and from Tyre and Sidon on the coast. Some of the people must have walked, with their families and babies, for hours, if not days, leaving their work behind them. Most of them would have been very poor, living from hand to mouth, making their own sandals, owning only one cloak, which was also their blanket at night, used to seeing half of their children dead by the age of five, used to the arthritis from stoop labour, accustomed to suffering. And they all wanted to touch Jesus, because he could heal them. Jesus could make them feel better, he brought them hope. I imagine that things could get pretty chaotic, pretty quickly, what with crowds of desperate people all needing something. In an age when medical care was mostly reliant on herb teas, bone setters, wound dressers, midwives with unwashed hands, magic charms and prayers and sacrifices: in those days a genuine, real-life healer got instant attention. For example, think about the time when Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, at home and indoors, Peter’s neighbours who needed healing were gathered outside the door before dinner was over!

Jesus might have spent a great deal of time healing people, casting out the demons of mental illness and erasing leprosy, but his ministry was equally fixed on teaching. And by teaching, I mean leading people to look at things in a revolutionary way. He turned more than the tables in the Temple upside down, he turned ideas upside down. The idea that there is only a fixed amount of material goods, or honour, or status, the notion that everything one person has, is something I can’t have: Jesus doesn’t want us to live that way.

Last Sunday we looked at the beatitudes as recounted by Luke. Talk about turning things upside down! Somehow people who seem lucky now, well fed and complacent: their sinful attitude will catch up with them, and they’re the ones who will be sorry in the life to come. And this week, Jesus tells us how he wants us to act, to behave, to live. He asks us to love the unlovable people. If someone insults and offends you, turn the other cheek. If someone steals from you, let them. Give to the beggars: even if you’re sure they’ll just go and buy booze or drugs, at least respect their freedom of will to make stupid choices. God loves them anyway. God loves us anyway.

God wants us to be happy, to be filled with joy. It so happens that I am in the process of slowly and fitfully reading through the Book of Joy again, it takes a lot of mental and spiritual digesting. But Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that acting towards other people with compassion makes us happy. Even babies choose toys that make them feel helpful: think of them cuddling their teddy bears and dolls, enjoying playing with kitchen toys: and if a Nobel prizewinner like Tutu says it is so, it must be so. But he goes further, he says that compassion spreads itself around, it makes us happier, it makes the people around us happier, and more compassionate, and the ripples spread further
and further afield, increasing human happiness.

Jesus points out that simply loving people who love us back is not to our credit: even sinners do that. But loving the bad people, without judgement: that is Christlike. That is what Jesus wants us to do. He wants us to love everyone. We don’t need to like everyone; we don’t need to trust everyone. But we do need to love everyone, whether or not we think they deserve it. Jesus says it better and more clearly than I ever could: “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

And Jesus goes on to point out that what goes around, comes around. Be careful about judging other people, because you open yourself up to being judged. If you don’t want to be condemned, don’t condemn other people. Forgive others as we wish to be forgiven. That’s very important, it’s part of the Lord’s prayer. Give, and it will be given to you. And above all, love everyone, even though you hate their guts. Act with love: love is returned. It’s a mighty tall order. Very difficult to carry out. But God wants us to
try, God knows we are human, God is merciful, and above all God is loving. What else can we do, but love everyone?

The Beatles said it pretty well: Love, love, love, Love is all you need. Because, in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make. Of course, we have our helper on our side, the Holy Spirit, loving us, leading us, supporting us, at all times, in all places.

Amen.