

# Let Rechabites Weep and Wowsers Howl

(Homily - Australia Day 2017- St John's Boldre - 2017)

Andrew Neaum

A wedding in Cana of Galilee, gallons and gallons of water into wine. It's enough to make a *Rechabite* weep and a *wowser* howl. But what is a *Rechabite*? What is a *wowser*?

## Rechabites and wowsers

The *Rechabites* were an Old Testament clan descended from Rechab, whose son Jehonadab commanded their descendants never to live in cities or to drink alcohol. So they didn't.

Many Muslims claim Rechab as an ancestor. That figures - they don't drink alcohol.

In 1835 Christian members of the *British Temperance Movement* formed a Friendly Society called the *Independent Order of Rechabites*. Their purpose: to promote total abstinence from alcohol everywhere. Well connected and financed, the Order still exists, I believe. *Rechabites*. Proselytes for teetotalism.

As for 'wowser', the word originates in Australia, and refers to kill-joys, to those who derive satisfaction from depriving others of their pleasures, especially booze. A *wowser* says the Australian poet C J Dennis, *is an ineffably pious person who mistakes this world for a prison and himself for a warder*.

The *Independent Order of Rechabites* were *wowsers*, so too all temperance movement members.

Their most astonishing achievement in Australia was to bring about, during the First World War, the 6pm closing of all pubs. It lasted right up into the mid nineteen sixties.

As with Prohibition in America, it didn't really work. It drove drinking underground and over-ground gave rise to the "Six o Clock Swill" a mad last-minute rush every evening after work to buy and guzzle as much drink as possible before hotel bars closed.

So Jesus' gallons and gallons of water into wine, is indeed enough to make a *Rechabite* weep and a *wowser* howl.

Incidentally, Australian winemakers, like Jesus are miracle workers. Astonishingly adept at producing gallons and gallons of wine but from little or no water in that arid land. Wonderful. Enough too, to make a *Rechabite* weep and a *wowser* howl.

## Larrikins and ockers

There's another Australian word linked to the word *wowser*. It is the word *larrikin*. Originally an insult, meaning lout, hoodlum or hooligan, it has been inverted to mean pretty well the opposite.

This is a characteristic of Australians. Anyone with red hair is nicknamed bluey. The word bastard is a term of affection. The word bloody is as anodyne as daft or silly.

So too *larrikin*, which is now proudly adopted as a positive attribute of the Australian character.

The *larrikin* is a bloke who refuses to kow tow to authority or to stand on ceremony. He's an attractive scallywag.

In what is called the *larrikin-wowser* nexus, *larrikinism* feeds on and encourages *wowserism* and vice versa. The *larrikin's* irreverent disdain for propriety, authority, convention and po-faced middle class values reinforces those qualities in *wowsers* encouraging them to wield a yet firmer hand to uphold and preserve them. The *larrikin-wowser* nexus.

Then there is the Australian term *ocker*. This also, while ostensibly insulting or deprecating, shows hints of being inverted almost into a compliment. The *ocker* person would be typically depicted in a blue singlet, with a tinnie in hand, rubber thongs on feet, a beer gut, and strong *strine* whine. Yet Richard Neville defines the term as being "about conviviality: comradeship with a touch of good-hearted sexism" That coarse Australian denizen of Earls Court, Barry Mackenzie like Dame Edna Everage, a Barry Humphries creation, is the *ocker of ockers*.

I used to puzzle and even annoy Australians by claiming Barry Mackenzie as the evangelist who first attracted me to Australia.

As a young Rhodesian supply teacher in 1970s London I was an avid reader of *Private Eye*, and there, in Barry Humphries' outrageous comic strip discovered and delighted in the exploits of the ocker of ocker, larrikin of larrikins Barry Mackenzie.

Ocker, gauche, coarse and foul-mouthed, yes, but also just a hint of attractive larrikinism. His persistent but always unsuccessful pursuit of Sheilas, while comical and entertaining, possessed as well a very faint, almost absent, not quite invisible, totally unexpected innocence and pathos. Last year as we waited to board a plane for Darwin We watched a gradual early morning build up of young Australians in overalls and great workmen's boots. They were waiting for flights to go out and maintain mines and outstations.

Whether it was our imaginations that invested them with an attractive, laid-back larrikinism or authentic larrikinism simply revealing itself to us, I am not sure, but there was something very strong, appealing, reassuring and attractive about them. It was good to be back among such folk.

And it sets me wondering about the Jesus I look up to, admire and love. It's the gallons and gallons of wine Jesus, It's the glutton and wine bibber accused Jesus, It's the whip of cords and over turner of tables Jesus, Its's the mingling with tax-collectors, sinners and whores Jesus, It's the insulter of pharisees Jesus, It's the courageous, refusing to run away Jesus, It's the yarn spinning, cryptic, radical Jesus. It's the subversive, questioning of authority Jesus, Perhaps then even the larrikin Jesus, the Australian Jesus....

At a large funeral last week, with crowds of lovely people from here there and everywhere present, after a most eloquent tribute, moving readings and a witty and accomplished eulogy, but little or no reference to Jesus and the Gospel at all except in the heartily sung hymns, it came to my little bit.

It is always a strange moment. You can pick up the vibes. "Oh no, (yawn) Here's the God stuff. I hope the boring old duffer doesn't go on for too long."

They expect no larrikin, attractive Jesus, no open-armed, fascinating, welcoming God. They expect Jesus a wowser, Jesus a Rechabite, Jesus a kill-joy, spoiler of people's pleasure the dead dull hero of a fuddy, duddy, dead dull church.

### **Larrikin Jesus**

So I surprised them with a glimpse of the larrikin Jesus.... To start, a reading from the first of John's three epistles all about love, the only scripture reading in the service. I then moved on to some brutal truths about death, aided by a couple of pessimistic snippets from Philip Larkin's bleakest of bleak poems *Aubade*,

But then a rhetorical surprise that startled them to the edge of their seats. After which I had all of them eating out of my hand. And for the first time ever, at a funeral, they applauded at the end. The rhetorical surprise was this: after my bleak assessment of death's darkness aided by Philip Larkin, I paused and said: "Well, I don't know about you, but I say bollocks to all that...." And I launched into a positive account of the Gospel of love aided by a rollicking ballad of Charles Causley's that only a miserable wowser or Rechabite could resist.

So on this Australia Day Sunday, lets all of us determine to love Jesus of Nazareth the larrikin and to live his Gospel in a way that makes Rechabites weep and wowsers howl.