

Episode 197 Truth, Culture and Rebirth

With Michael Lloyd

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Michael Lloyd

Well hi, I'm Michael Lloyd. I'm the principal of Wycliffe Hall. It's a real pleasure to be with you.

David Capes

Dr. Michael Lloyd, good to see you. Thanks for being with us on *The Stone Chapel Podcast*.

Michael Lloyd

It's really good to be with you again. And you know, having me back might seem like Oscar Wilde said, "To do it once might be a misfortune. To do it twice looks like carelessness".

David Capes

We're not being careless, I promise you! We're so thrilled to be here in your office in Oxford. Now, for those of you who haven't heard the earlier podcast we did with Dr Michael Lloyd, go back and listen to that because we do a little biography. He is often referred to by his students as Dr Evil.

Michael Lloyd

And I'm hoping that's because of my work on the problem of evil. But I guess there may be other reasons.

David Capes

There could be other reasons. Maybe it's that sinister grin that you have.

Michael Lloyd

Maybe. I work on it!

David Capes

Today we're going to discuss for a few minutes a project that you envisioned. You're beginning to work on it here at one of the great educational centers of the world. Really, the first time you broached it to me, you referred to it as the Renaissance Project.

Michael Lloyd

I did, and well done with the English style pronunciation. Although I suspect the French would not like either of the ways that the Brits or Americans say it!

David Capes

Because I grew up saying a renaissance.

Michael Lloyd

Yes, I think they would say Renaissance. But probably that's right. I think, in terms of how I came up with the idea, our bursa here at our college in charge of the finances, said we need some strategic priorities for Wycliffe Hall. We've got our vision and that's great. We've got what we do on the ground. We need something to focus the vision and help us prioritize things. And I hate doing that sort of thing. I'm really hopeless at doing it. And I thought it's going to take me a week to write these things. And actually, I sat down and wrote them in a couple of hours, and some of them were fairly mundane things like getting ourselves on a secure, sustainable financial footing and all that sort of thing.

David Capes

All those kind of things that someone who's in charge has to do.

Michael Lloyd

But then I thought, I've been looking at our society, and the way in which I think it's at a bit of a crossroads. My sense is that people are just beginning to get fed up with the relativism that has been the main air we've breathed for the last generation or two. By relativism, I mean the view that there's a whole lot of different truths, but there's no overarching truth.

David Capes

There's no subjective truth. Your truth is not my truth, my truth is not your truth. It's become very fashionable in media and movies.

Michael Lloyd

Yes, all of that. But I sense that people are getting dissatisfied with it. I sense that people are beginning to realize it's not their friend. The whole post truth phenomenon has, I think, scared people, and there are all sorts of reasons for that. One is, it's not the friend of science. Science doesn't believe that the big bang theory is no better than the universe is on the back of a giant turtle explanation. It doesn't think that the flat earth view is as good as the spherical globe view. It can't work on that kind of set of premises.

Justice cannot work on a that. No court of law thinks that the two views they're trying to decide between are equally valid. No. One is going to be better evidence than the other. Nobody who's been forcefully accused of something, thinks that each narrative is equally valid. I think people are beginning to get fed up with it. But they're afraid to go back to an idea of absolute truth, because they're afraid that if anybody believes something to be absolutely true, they will impose it on them by force.

David Capes

So it's a matter of power then?

Michael Lloyd

It's about power, and that's not a groundless fear. You know, there were the inquisitions. There is the Taliban. There are the police of the Iranian force who impose Sharia law upon people in Afghanistan. So it's not an unreal or an unreasonable fear, and I'm aware that I'm taking a long time to get to the point, but I'll get there. I will get there!

David Capes

It's crucial to build this theoretical idea of the center for you.

Michael Lloyd

I think the Christian faith has something to speak into that context, something sane and undergirding all that is good. The values that we actually hold, like justice and that sort of thing, and truth, because we serve somebody who did not impose their agenda on others by force. If anything, he allowed others to impose their agenda on him by force. That's what the cross is. I think the cross defuses our contemporaries real, real fear that if you believe anything absolutely, you'll impose it on others by force. Because any system that is based upon the cross is never going to do that. It's only going to persuade. It's never going to impose.

David Capes

The power of persuasion is very important and crucial to this whole thing.

Michael Lloyd

It really is. We have to make a case but we don't always make it well.

David Capes

A telling case, a good case, like you do in a court of law.

Michael Lloyd

Well exactly. The problem is, I think we've got something really, really important to say that could, as I say, defuse people's fears of truth. But we haven't been talking to our society for a couple of generations, and we've been talking to ourselves, the church has, and not always very politely or nicely. With the result, who'd have thought it, that society thinks were irrelevant. We'd not been engaging with them. We've got to learn to engage with our society and our contemporaries, and that means listening to them as well as speaking to them.

David Capes

James talks about being quick to listen, slow to speak.

Michael Lloyd

Exactly and if we started doing that, I think we'd find that they were willing to listen. My experience as a college Chaplain is not that young people are not interested in Christianity. I think they're really, really interested. But A we have to make a good case. And B, we've got to rebuild trust.

David Capes

The whole idea of a renaissance is a rebirth. It's a starting again. In a sense, going back to some foundational things.

Michael Lloyd

Yes, exactly. And clearly the Italian Renaissance, and there's been a number of renaissances through history, but the Italian one, which is the main one that people always refer to, had this advantage going back to the sources of thing. They were going back to the Greek New Testament and going back to the classical writers.

David Capes

Going back to Aristotle, going back to Plato.

Michael Lloyd

Yes. I think we have to go back to all those things and find them enriching. But obviously, being an evangelical Christian, I think going back to the biblical sources is really important. But what Wycliffe is trying to do, what we think we can offer to this process, to this rebirth, is two things. We're wanting a new renaissance of Christian scholarship and culture scholarship. Because we've got to out-think the critics and offer a bigger, richer vision of what it is to be human than the secular world can offer.

David Capes

And this is not just in theology. This is in all areas of disciplines of scholarship. We're looking at a book on your table by Tom Holland, *A Dominion*. He makes the case, I think, a very compelling case, that much of what we celebrate in the modern world, in terms of values, in terms of virtues, were endemic to Christianity, and probably could not have come into the world apart from it.

Michael Lloyd

Exactly because of the Lordship of Christ. Christ is relevant. He's Lord of everything. Not just the religious bits, not just the theological bits, but the whole thing. There is no sacred-secular divide. And therefore I think God is going to be relevant to every area of life. And therefore we've got to address every area of life. We've got to do our thinking so that it is relevant to every area of life.

We've got to show the relevance and the sanity and the beauty of Christian values and assumptions to every area of life. I think that's exactly right. I mean, here we are at Wycliffe Hall as part of Oxford University. Oxford University itself, and most of the old universities were originally monastic foundations. Training people for either the monastic life or for ordained ministry. They were Christian organizations. That's why we call our lecturers Fellows here at Oxford, because they're people you have fellowship with. They are people you worship with and eat with and live with and engage with and argue with.

David Capes

Hopefully congenially!

Michael Lloyd

Yes, hopefully congenially. So that's the first thing. We've got to do our scholarship so well that it can't be ignored. And I think here we have to build on having NT Wright here as our Senior Research Fellow to build a community of scholars who will A do their scholarship really well. B, do it in other areas than just theology. And C, do it in an outward way that engages with our culture.

But secondly, create a new renaissance of Christian scholarship and culture. Because it seems to me that the arts shape what people can imagine, and what people can imagine shapes what they can believe. So Christian artists and composers and poets and filmmakers have a really, really significant role to play in shaping the culture and making it more amenable to the gospel. We've got an artist in residence here, who's fantastic, also a good musician, but I'd love to have a composer in residence, a filmmaker in residence, choreographer in residence.

Whatever it might be, but a small creative community who will provide people with the beauty that I think they're crying out for. I think one of the things the pandemic showed us is that people need beauty. They are crying out for beauty. Long for beauty. If we can give it to them, to show the beauty of the Christian conception of life, that people would resonate with that quite deeply.

David Capes

Now this is a pretty tall order. This is not the kind of thing that you'd do on a weekend. It's takes a little longer than that. It's a cultural shift. We are where we are now because of 50-60 years of cultural messaging. It will be long after my lifetime before we'll be able to get back to something that is similar to what we've left behind, but something better than what we left behind.

Michael Lloyd

Well, one thinks of somebody, obviously here in Oxford, you think of somebody like C.S. Lewis, who was a very, very fine scholar. He was not a theologian, but in a different discipline, different subject, who had a huge impact as a Christian academic. People talk about the academic world being an ivory tower. It really isn't. What is taught and thought in the universities today is what people will be believing in the streets in 20-25, years. And he had a huge impact on that.

But he also had a huge impact as a creative writer, as a novelist, as a children's writer. He in a sense, is a very good example of what I'm talking about. His children's books, his Narnia books are being read still by people who are outside the church, and that does have an impact on how they see the world, how they understand the world. They have given people a kind of multi-dimensional understanding of life. We want to do something along those lines.

David Capes

So that means gathering together some very fine scholars, giving space and resources to do their creative thing.

Michael Lloyd

Yes. And also, we want to mentor Christian academics in every discipline, not just theology. But in sociology, chemistry, literature, music, whatever it might be, particularly those where there aren't many Christians at the moment.

David Capes

Anthropology comes to mind, sociology. Those are some areas, at least in the States, those are some areas.

Michael Lloyd

I think that's true here, too. In fact, you know the old traditional, science versus faith thing. That doesn't work anymore. There's so many Christians who are chemists and physicists. That's not where the problem lies. It's much more with the humanities and social sciences. And we would love to be feeding young Christian academics into faculties around the world.

David Capes

Well, to do this, you're going to need partners. You're going to need people to fund the project. And so how are you going about funding?

Michael Lloyd

Well, we are in the silent phase of a campaign, okay, but you're absolutely right. The Italian Renaissance was largely driven by patrons, very wealthy people. The Médicis and people like that. And we are going to be asking people, would you be a patron?

David Capes

Would you be a patron of the arts once again?

Michael Lloyd

Exactly. Well, you know, the Church used to be a patron of the arts, and it used to be influential. It's now not a patron of the arts and it's not influential. And I wonder if these two facts are in some way related.

David Capes

They may well be related. That's a good insight. And what about partners then?

Michael Lloyd

Well obviously, people, particular people, scholars and creative people. But there are other institutions who are doing related things, and we would very gladly work with them. This isn't something that we can do alone. But we do think that being a Christian college that's part of a global university like Oxford gives us a particular role and a particular responsibility, and a contribution.

David Capes

It gives you a leverage. There's a project in the United States that we have begun to work with a bit. It's called the Christian Mind Project. It's a part of the work of *Inspire*, which is funded by the Green family and others in the United States and it has some very similar goals and ambitions. And I don't know if there may be some traction that could go on with what you're doing. I'm not sure they're aware of what you're doing. We need to have those kind of conversations at a pretty high level. We can begin saying

there are people in the United States, people in Europe. Because this is a mainly Western issue, isn't it?

Michael Lloyd

Well this is where the church has mainly been in retreat, I think, and where we want to revitalize it and get it back on track. This is a cricketing analogy, so I apologize, but get back on the front foot. Okay, we've been on the back foot for too long, being reactive and defensive, and I think we need to be on the front foot.

David Capes

Yes. In baseball, if you're really going to hit the ball far, you've got to get that front foot moving. So that analogy works with baseball as well. Well, we'll be tracking with you on this, and we'll be working to figure out if there are things we can do in Houston to support and make this dream, this new renaissance, a reality.

Michael Lloyd

Well we'd appreciate that. We very much value the friendship that we have, and so let's stay in touch.

David Capes

Let's do it. Dr Michael Lloyd, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel podcast.

Michael Lloyd

Thank you very much indeed. Bye.