

# THE AMERICAN PULPIT

A Volume of Sermons by Twenty-five of  
the Foremost Living American Preachers,  
Chosen by a Poll of All the Protestant  
Ministers in the United States, Nearly  
Twenty-five Thousand of Whom Cast  
Their Votes

*Edited by*  
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Editor *The Christian Century*



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## JAMES ISAAC VANCE

Born at Bristol, Tennessee, in 1862, while his father was away fighting in the Confederate Army, a child of reconstruction and poverty, the career of Dr. Vance is the story of a determined spirit struggling against difficulties and rising from achievement to achievement and recognized leadership. He was graduated at King College, Tennessee, with his A.B. degree in 1883, and received his A.M. degree from the same institution in 1886. His ministerial training was received at Union Theological Seminary, in Virginia, where he graduated in 1886. King College gave him the D.D. degree, as did also Hampden-Sidney College, both in 1896, and King followed it in 1913 with LL.D.

Dr. Vance was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry in 1886 and held pastorates successively in Wytheville, Alexandria and Norfolk, all in Virginia. He was in the midst of his flourishing pastorate at Norfolk when a call came from First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee, which he accepted in 1894, ministering there for six years. He was called to the North Reformed Church, Newark, New Jersey, and accepted. With the passing of the decade between 1900 and 1910 an unusual thing happened: he was invited to return to his former Nashville parish. Lured by the memory of old affections as well as by the prospect of significant service, he yielded to his former people's persuasions. There he has done the great work of his life in the fifteen years of his second pastorate. His church is located on the busiest corner in the downtown section. Across the street is the largest theatre in Nashville. In the winter of 1925 Dr. Vance moved his Sunday evening congregation to this theatre, augmented his quartette choir with a chorus of fifty voices, invited the public to fill the

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seats—and they did, with more public than seats. For Sunday night after Sunday night, from January to Easter, these services, evangelistic in character, continued. Dr. Vance, though not an evangelist in the special sense, knows, as every Christian preacher ought to know, how to “cast the net.” This indispensable exercise of all true evangelical preaching resulted in the commitment of many hundreds of persons to a personal decision for Christ. The outcome of the experiment was so fruitful and gratifying that it is Dr. Vance’s intention to repeat the doing of it in the same theatre each season.

Dr. Vance’s interests and services have extended far beyond his local parish. There are few men in positions of large pastoral responsibility who have shared in so many general movements of his own denomination and the general church as has he. To name the committees of national and denominational significance on which he has served, and still serves, would be like making a catalogue of all our good causes. His membership on the United Welfare Council during the war put into his mind the conception which later materialized in the Interchurch World Movement, a project which held more hope for American Protestantism than any united undertaking ever proposed to the churches, and which met defeat on the rocks of our sectarian near-sightedness. Dr. Vance was moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1918. He is the author of *Royal Manhood*, *The Rise of a Soul*, *The Eternal in Man*, *Life’s Terminals*, *The Life of Service*, *The Breaking of Bread*, *Being a Preacher*.

## THE OLD RUGGED CROSS

By JAMES I. VANCE

*"And he, bearing his cross, went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha."—John xix, 17.*

Stained, shamed, discredited, rejected, his foes in a frenzy of glee over his fall, his friends in a frenzy of fear over his defeat, his strength gone, his body broken, Christ staggers on over the rough stones of the narrow street, under the crushing load of his heavy cross, toward a spot so grim and ghastly and hideous that the Romans called it Calvary, and the Jews, Golgotha, the place of a skull. Such is the picture. It must never be forgotten. We must never allow its colors to grow dim or its fierce lines to fade. We must never swap the peasant Messiah for a mere halo Christ. It is a picture before which you can fall on your knees. It is a sight to break your heart. It is a scene to capture and command the soul. "And he, bearing his cross, went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha."

### MOCKERY OF MODERN JERUSALEM

It is all so different now. When one goes back to the place where all this transpired, and seeks for Christ amid the gaudy shrines which men have built, and stands on spots whose only claim to sanctity is a doubtful tradition, and listens to the clamor of the beggars

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about the door of the church of the holy sepulchre, and follows the dirty priests with their dim candles and drops into their itching palms a coin, it is disgust rather than reverence that fills him. He must have found Christ elsewhere, if faith is to survive, and his imagination must be able to pick the infinite out of the sordid and to discover the spiritual back of the sensual, if he is to feel in any way that the ground whereon he stands is holy.

Even art has led us far from the virile and rugged simplicities of that day in old Jerusalem when the broken Christ carried his cross down the winding Via Sacra and on to the place of a skull. Art spiritualizes. It would hide the skull with flowers. It would still the pain with perfume. It would cover the gaunt cross with climbing, clinging vines. Art places a halo on the brow of death. It is well for us to have this, too. It is well to treasure the cross in art, to see the unseen, as art interprets Christ; to listen past his frenzied foes shouting, "Crucify him!"; to look beyond his scared friends watching, with their hearts in their faces, their hopes die; to see further than the stained figure of the defeated Christ and behold the radiant figure of the reigning Christ, meanwhile watching the grim contour of a cross change into the gleam of a crown.

### HOLDING FAST THE REAL

But we must not be so absorbed with the ideal as to lose the real. We must not let art lure us so far from reality as to forget the rugged cross on which they nailed the worn body of a Man who had come by a long and hard and weary road to his Golgotha. We must not become so enamored of the cross in art as to forget there was a cross stained and dripping with

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blood. We must not make so much of the little colored crosses painted on glass and canvas, or the architectural crosses topping church spires, or the little jeweled crosses hanging from fat necks, that we forget the rude cross, splintered and rough-hewn, coarse and inartistic, on which the body of the Son of God hung in holy expiation for the sin of the world. We must not allow our Christianity to become so soft, so artistic, so dilettante, so lacking in grim reality, so empty of the rich, red blood of Calvary, as to forget the old rugged cross. "And he, bearing his cross, went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew, Golgotha."

Christianity is a rugged religion. It is built around a rugged cross—not around a throne, but a cross, not around an altar, a church, but around a place of expiation, not around a pageant of victory, but around a scene of defeat. The actual cross on which Christ hung has long since rotted and turned to dust. Jesus never meant his disciples to dwindle down into a race of relic-hunters and site-worshippers. The sanctities he would have them cherish are truth, and goodness, and virtue, and purity, and charity, and good will, and love, and service. The service he would have them render is to the living—not to whited skeletons long deserted of their animating souls, and the God he would have them worship is not a cult hidden in robe and ritual, but the great Spirit who must be worshiped "in spirit and in truth."

### THE CHRIST OF TODAY

Christ is to be found now no less than when he was here in the flesh. He is still to be found amid the simple and homely and rugged scenes of our common

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humanity. If you would find him, seek for him not so much in the galleries of art, not so much in the palaces of power and pomp, not so much in vast cathedrals whose steepled silence and Gothic splendors cast a spell on the senses. Seek him rather in some carpenter's shop, on some humble street, in some fisherman's boat, where men worn with fruitless toil long for a better day. Seek him beside some well where waits a thirsty heart. Seek him where there are little children who need a friend, and sick people who need a physician, and burden-bearers who cry for rest. Seek him where there are souls to save and hearts to comfort.

So many make the mistake of Brewer Mattocks' parish priest:

The parish priest of Austerity,  
Climbed up in a high church steeple  
To be nearer to God,  
So that he might hand  
His word down to His people.

When the sun was high, when the sun was low,  
The good man sat unheeding  
Sublunary things;  
From transcendency  
Was he forever reading.

And now and again, when he heard the creak  
Of the weather vane a-turning,  
He closed his eyes,  
And said: "Of a truth,  
From God I now am learning."

And in sermon script he daily wrote  
What he thought was sent from heaven,  
And he dropped this down  
On his people's heads  
Two times one day in seven.

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In his age God said: "Come down and die!"

And he cried from out the steeple:

"Where art Thou, Lord?"

And the Lord replied:

"Down here among my people!"

Christianity is rugged with its hatred of shams and hypocrisies and artificialities, with its stern demand for simplicity and sincerity and genuineness. It washes off the paint. It tears aside the mask. It strips off the veneer, and says: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." There is an eye that "slumbers not nor sleeps," and that eye pierces all disguises. In a church I once served there was a rough fellow, a boiler engineer, a little Frenchman from Canada. His career had been checkered. Often he borrowed money from me, but always, sooner or later, the score was paid. For months he would be without a job. He was holding his job at sixty dollars a month, and paying half his wages toward the rent and support of a plumber friend who seemed to be without work. Peter naturally was interested in getting this friend a job, and several times thought he had succeeded; but, for some reason or other, the plumber did not tarry long at any position found for him. Finally Peter grew suspicious, and confided in me his doubts. He said: "I am afraid George does not want to work." I said: "Peter, give him one more trial. He may fool us, but he cannot fool God." Jumping to his feet, his little black eyes snapping like fire, he cried out as though he had made a brand new discovery: "No, Doc, he can fool us, but he can never fool God, can he?" Christianity is the religion of a searchlight, stern and uncompromising, whose God cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance.

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## A RUGGED RELIGION

Christianity is rugged, with great truths that thrust in, out of the infinite, taller and wider and bigger than the measure of man's mind. These great truths are beyond our comprehension, but not our apprehension. We cannot understand them, but we can possess them, and build on them, as on a bed-rock foundation, an experience of triumphant assurance which shouts in the face of every doubt: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day!"

Christianity is rugged in the red-blooded virtues it inculcates—common honesty, unpurchasable integrity, uncompromising conviction, zeal for righteousness, and a devotion to truth which does not back down at death. It puts a spine into character. It enables a man to stand alone and face the crowd, "not with eye service as men pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart."

It is stern in its grim and rugged demand for plain devotedness to duty. Christianity teaches that a man must do his duty at whatever cost. The question is not whether duty be pleasant, whether it be popular, whether it be profitable. Is it duty? Then it has the right of way. It calls for that sort of desperate faith which says: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him."

It is rugged with a consecration that has more than phrases to offer, that digs down deep into sacrifice and surrender, that burns all bridges behind it, that puts life itself in pawn, and says with Paul: "What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ; yea, doubtless and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord."

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It is rugged in the heroic tasks to which it summons us. It calls for more than a creed subscription. A Christian must do more than shout for orthodoxy and sit back in cushioned ease on fat endowments, smoking good cigars and defending "the faith once delivered to the saints." These tasks are not finished until Calvary is reached. The kind of saint Christianity produces is not a sallow face under a dim halo, but a heart courageous and a soul heroic, one who judges that because Christ died for all, "then were all dead, and that he died for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again."

### A TALE OF ROME

Christianity is rugged in the devotion it demands for the Hero of the old rugged cross. Last summer I spent a morning amid the gigantic ruins of the coliseum at Rome. Begun by Vespasian in 69 and finished by Titus in 80, it became one of the greatest playhouses on earth. Five thousand animals were slain in the shows connected with its dedication. I could see the chambers underground where the wild beasts were confined, and also the doors where the Christian martyrs entered to fight with wild beasts, that amusement might be furnished the hundred thousand spectators who crowded the vast amphitheatre. As I wandered amid the ruins, trying to visualize scenes that had taken place there long ago, I recalled the story of the wrestlers.

It is said that one day news reached the emperor that all the gladiators, forty in number, had become Christians. He immediately sent word that they must

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give up their faith in Christ, and, failing to do so, they would be placed in charge of a Roman guard and taken to the wildest and bleakest spot that could be found in the mountains of northern Italy, and there, amid the eternal snows, without food or shelter, they were to be turned out to die of starvation and exposure. The message was delivered. To a man, they stood true. The emperor's order was carried out. In charge of the soldiers, they were taken up, up, until the wildest and bleakest spot that could be found in the Alps was reached, and there they were dismissed to their fate. That night as the Roman officer lay sleeping in his tent, his dreams were disturbed by a weird chant that seemed to be borne in on the night winds. As he came to consciousness, this is what he heard: "Forty wrestlers wrestling for Christ ask of him the victory and claim for him the crown." Wide awake now, it came with greater distinctness. The men he had turned out to die were singing, and this was their victory song. He began to think of the devotion which must animate men who under such circumstances could sing such a song. He knew something of the devotion of a Roman soldier to the empire, but he knew that a Roman soldier was a total stranger to the kind of enthusiasm that was flaming in the breasts of those men out there in the night and the cold. While he was musing, a poor wretch fell through the flap of his tent on the floor, half dead, beside him and begged permission to recant. "Art thou the only one that durst ask this?" he said. "The only one, sire," the frozen wretch replied. Then, leaping to his feet, tearing his military cloak from his shoulders and casting it on the poor apostate there on the ground, he

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cried: "By the gods, I will have thy place!" And out into the night he went, and soon again the chant unbroken sounded out amid those bleak peaks: "Forty wrestlers wrestling for Christ ask of him the victory and claim for him the crown."

This is the kind of devotion that fits the old rugged cross, and when the Christian church can furnish such enthusiasm, can rally with such undying courage, the world will crown Christ king. Since Christianity is this kind of religion, it can save you. It can save anybody. It can change the world. It can make the worst best. It can save "unto the uttermost." It can grapple with ages of error, and slavery, and oppression, and throw off the yoke, and snap chains, and bring in the great emancipation.

### NOT A CULT

Christianity is not a cult to entertain us with novel-ties, or befog us with mysteries, or enslave us with traditions. It does not hide away in the silence of stately shrines, in the dim cells of asceticism, to tantalize with shadows or startle with pantomimes. Christianity is rugged with the realism of Calvary, a real birth, a real life, a real death, a real resurrection, a real redemption. This must be kept forever before the faces of men. And so Christ would call us back again and again to that procession through the narrow streets and out to the place of a skull.

It is a bankrupt religion that has no cross. It is a stale religion that has grown so used to the cross as to be no longer thrilled by its gaunt arms and grim tragedy. It is a spent religion that has become so cultured as to be powerless to reproduce. It is a Christless religion that has no Calvary. Back to the old rugged

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cross! "And he, bearing his cross, went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha."

I will cherish the old rugged cross,  
Till my trophies at last I lay down;  
I will cling to the old rugged cross,  
And exchange it some day for a crown.