

ment of our faith, but the reply has so often been (as one vicar recently wrote), 'I am sure many would heartily disapprove of it but it was one of the pieces of literature available for people like me who visited our neighbours in St. X Church!' Now at last, the Church has drawn herself up to full force, so to speak, and in the persons of her shepherds overwhelmingly affirmed that her mind is set on reform. When views are being promulgated by an Ecumenical Council they are no longer suspect or clandestine—though regarded as such a few short years ago. A fire has clearly been lit in the Vatican, and men from India and Chile, Germany and Syria, Egypt and the United States, Belgium and Burundi-Ruanda are rising to deliver messages from the Spirit. Six shillings provides anyone interested with quite an earful.

JAMES TUNSTEAD BURTCHABLL, C.S.C.

EARLY CHRISTIAN RHETORIC, *The Language of the Gospel*, by Amos N. Wilder; S.C.M., 25s.

This volume is on several counts a distinguished contribution to the 'New Testament Library' series. First, it is addressed to a problem that is central in current New Testament study and often either taken for granted or even misunderstood—the question of literary forms in the gospels and the other books. Secondly, it is written by a scholar who brings very particular personal qualifications to his work, for Professor Wilder, of Harvard University, is at the same time an eminent *Neutestamentler*, the author of several volumes of poetry, and a student of modern literature. His sensitive feeling for language itself is reflected on every page of this study of the language of the gospel. And thirdly, this book is the product of a mature and devoted reflection on the New Testament that shines through in a way we are not accustomed to find in works of biblical scholarship. What a pleasure to recommend a work that is not only scholarly and extremely well balanced but also a delight to read. One is tempted to say that it is deceptively well written, for behind the author's engaging style lies unobtrusively a keen critical judgment of an immense field of literature on the Bible.

The title is somewhat deceptive too, but it is vindicated at the outset. Instead of calling his work an analysis of literary forms in the New Testament, Professor Wilder chooses the term 'rhetoric' in order to embrace both the written and the oral forms of communication in the early Church. Successive chapters in the book study some general features of the Christian 'speech-event', then specific forms: dialogue, story, parable and poem, and finally the New Testament use of image, symbol and myth. Two principal motifs seem to underlie the whole treatment. The first is the author's stress on the newness of the Christian utterance which arises from the unique novelty of the events it proclaims. Even when they use the familiar common language of their own milieu and the literary forms of the Jewish and Hellenistic cultures, the New Testament writers invest them with new dimensions unparalleled in the history of religious communication. The second motif is related to this: it is the salutary insistence upon the intimate bond

that exists between the forms of the Christian message and their content. No merely formal analysis of the gospel can convey an adequate sense of what the gospel is.

The book is filled with penetrating insights into the early Christian mind and its modes of expression. Professor Wilder can comment on such an apparently banal point as the length of the various New Testament books and transform it into a profound reflection on the relation between literary brevity and the brief span of Jesus' career or on the difference between rhetorical persuasion and revelation. Frequently his insights find felicitous expression: of the difficulty of attaining the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, he writes: 'Jesus' creative speech was so fresh and significant that it could, as it were, breed speech true to itself' (p. 90). In discussing the startling poetic fragment in Eph. 5. 14, he reminds us: 'Christian speech can have this kind of sublime non-sense because it arises from those depths where the world is still fluid and where all our usual categories are in question' (p. 117). I find particularly rewarding his analysis of myth as a New Testament form and his critique of some misconceptions of the problem of mythical language. 'Demythologizing', he rightly maintains, is no solution. He appropriately points out a weakness of many existentialist interpreters: they fail to realise that the New Testament sets out to provide not only a new self-understanding but also a new world-understanding with historical dimensions.

The author's treatment of myth is a reminder that this book is not meant to be an elementary introduction to the problems of New Testament criticism. It presupposes a certain familiarity with the categories of the discipline, and the discriminating reader may not accept all its judgements. For example he may not be as ready as the author is to admit extensive Gnostic influence upon the New Testament, especially on certain poetic passages of the Epistles or of the Fourth Gospel. Though our gradually increasing knowledge of Gnosticism may tend to push backwards the roots of the movement, there is still a sort of anachronism in arguing for Gnostic influence in the New Testament from demonstrably later Gnostic parallels.

But let us not imagine that such instances are frequent in this valuable book. They are rare and are far outweighed by the sensitive insight into the language of the early Church which the author so eloquently shares with us.

GEORGE MACRAE, S.J.

PAUL ON PREACHING, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P.; Sheed and Ward, 15s.

MASTER SERMONS THROUGH THE AGES, selected and edited by William Alan Sadler, Jr., S.C.M. Press, 25s.

One aspect of the complex thing that is happening in the Church at the moment is that she is discovering her role as the community in which the *Word* of God is mediated to men. The stress in the Council's liturgical constitution on *conscious*,