

REVIEWS

THE PARADISE TREE. By Gerald Vann, O.P. (Collins; 18s.)

One of the most difficult religious problems of our day has been the relevance of the symbols of religious language and worship to the clear and defined concepts that regulate secular life. For long it seemed that the traditional modes of expression of the liturgy, and indeed of Scripture, must be regarded as merely mythological; that is to say they belonged to the realm of fantasy or to an infantile stage in man's development. More recently we have become aware that this 'dream' language makes a claim that must be answered, if the drives it represents are not to disturb or distort man's life and his understanding of himself. It is not so much a question of de-mythologizing, as one of understanding the myth and the values it expresses.

Does this raise a problem for the Christian? Are the mythological types and events so clearly realized in the gospels simply one form among others of an archetypal pattern common to all religious thinking? The first part of Fr Gerald's book is concerned to answer these questions. He shows how these types are realized in the gospels (which corresponds to our obscurely sensed expectations), while at the same time he makes it clear that the Christian mystery drama is historical. The events described in the gospels are described in mythological language, not because they are fantastic or dream-like, but because this language is best suited to speaking of a living event, whose claim is both concrete and absolute. In this part of his work Fr Gerald gives a most valuable interpretation of the commandments, showing their living relevance with imaginative skill and a wise prudence that rises from his study of St Thomas.

The second part of the book consists in a commentary on the Mass in which an understanding of religious symbolism is applied to the great act of Christian worship. The treatment of the Mass that results is illuminating. It is refreshing to read a commentary on the Mass that does not consist only of rubrical details, archaeological trivialities, and pious platitudes. This is not to say that Fr Gerald is ignorant of the details of liturgical scholarship, but he is not obsessed by them, so that they only enter into his book in so far as they express some religious value. It is true that his manner of treatment does presuppose some self-consciousness about myth and psychology in the reader; but this is so marked a feature of our age that the vast majority of his readers will have no difficulty in recognizing the relevance of what he is saying.

IAN HISLOP, O.P.