

Readings: *Ecclesiasticus 36: 6 – 10; Psalm 36 (37): 3 – 6, 31, 32; Matthew 16: 13 – 19.*

Leo was probably born in Rome at the end of the fourth century. While still a young man he was ordained (probably as a deacon) and became an adviser to two popes. In AD 440 while on a mission to Gaul he was elected Bishop of Rome. By this time the Roman Empire was divided between Eastern and Western rulers, and Ravenna had become the capital of the Emperor of the West. This led to increasing secular responsibilities for the Bishop of Rome.

At the same time the Church was divided on matters of doctrine – particularly on the nature of Christ. Some bishops and some emperors had accepted the belief that Christ had only one nature, his divinity, which had totally absorbed his humanity. Leo's response was twofold: he wrote a letter, known as *The Tome of Leo*, which set out the teaching that Jesus Christ is one person in whom two natures, divine and human, are united with no confusion. When this letter was rejected by a Council, Leo demanded another. This Council met at Chalcedon on the Bosphorus in 451 and was attended by six hundred bishops, almost all of them from the East. Three papal legates were also present. When they read out the *Tome* it was met with general acclamation: "This is the faith of the fathers. Peter has spoken through Leo." This remains the orthodox faith of the Church: Jesus is "True God and True Man". Leo's teaching on the reality of the incarnation of Jesus as a human being is expressed in many of his sermons.

In this and other ways Leo affirmed the influence and authority of the successors of St Peter.

In 452 Attila led the Huns (a nomadic people from central Asia) into northern Italy and sacked the city of Milan. When he moved south towards Rome Leo went to meet him and persuaded him to accept tribute rather than sack the city. Three years later he tried unsuccessfully to persuade another barbarian general, Genseric the Vandal from North Africa, to accept tribute. This time the city was plundered, and many people were taken captive to Africa. In addition to his other responsibilities, Leo sent priests and money to help these captives.

Leo died on 10th November 461 and was buried in the portico of old Saint Peter's – the first pope to be buried in the basilica. In 688 his body was moved inside the church, and when the present basilica was built in the sixteenth century an altar of Saint Leo was provided in the south transept.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

On another subject Leo's advice was rejected by the Council of Chalcedon, and Constantinople was made a patriarchate on the political grounds that it was 'the New Rome'. This contributed to the later split between East and West, and indirectly to rivalry between Constantinople and Moscow, which was declared to be 'the Third Rome'.