

Readings for Today: 1 Peter 5: 1 – 4; Psalm 88(89):2 – 5, 21 – 27; Matthew 16: 13 – 19.

Clement is traditionally regarded as third in the line of successors to the 'chair of Peter', and as such is accorded the title 'Pope': that explains the choice of readings for today. But to insist on the title 'the third pope' for Clement is to read back into history a later understanding of the office of the leader of the Church in Rome. At the same time, however, there is no doubt that Clement played a vital part in the succession of pastoral authority from the apostles Peter and Paul to the ministry of a single Bishop of Rome, which is clear by the middle of the second century.

(The historical argument is set out in Eamonn Duffy's book 'Saints and Sinners'.)

What we know of Clement is this: that he was the author of an *Epistle to the Corinthians*, written towards the end of the first century. It is the earliest surviving document in which the Roman Church intervenes in the affairs of another Church, and was widely read in churches.

This makes Clement the first of a group of teachers called 'The Apostolic Fathers'. They were leaders in the second and third generations of Christians, often believed to have been disciples of those who had known the apostles. Clement does not claim to be Bishop of Rome, but writes as "We", from "*the Church of God which lives as an alien in Rome*". From this it is reasonable to assume that Clement was one of the "*rulers of the Church*", or "*elders who preside over the Church*", of whom we hear at the beginning of the second century.

The *Letter to the Corinthians* was prompted by a dispute in their Church, and the author urges them to follow the example of those who, despite the troubled times in which they lived, have been faithful, among them the apostles Peter and Paul. He points to the humility of Christ: *You see, dearly beloved, what is the pattern that has been given to us; for if the Lord was lowly of mind, what should we do, who through him have been brought under the yoke of his grace?* He writes of the glory which awaits those who obey God's laws, and urges the Corinthians to maintain the unity of the body, and to accept the authority of the ministers who are the successors of the apostles.

A much later legend describes Clement's martyrdom by drowning, tied to an anchor (which has become his symbol), the discovery of his body, and its translation to the ancient Roman church of San Clemente, built over a Roman house which was probably an early 'house-church'.