



November 23

Commemoration: Clement, Bishop of Rome, c. 100

Clement is counted as the third bishop of Rome (after the apostles). His predecessors are Linus and Cletus (or Anacletus, or Anencletus), about whom almost nothing is known. They are simply names on a list. Clement is a little more than this, chiefly because he wrote a letter to the Corinthians, which was highly valued by the early church, and has been preserved to the present day. The letter itself does not carry his name, but is merely addressed from the congregation at Rome to the congregation at Corinth.

However, a letter from Corinth to Rome a few decades

later refers to "the letter we received from your bishop Clement, which we still read regularly." Other early writers are unanimous in attributing the letter to Clement. Perhaps because this letter made his name familiar, he has had an early anonymous sermon (commonly called *II Clement*) attributed to him, and is a character in some early religious romances (e.g. the *Clementine Recognitions*).

One story about Clement is that he was put to death by being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea. Accordingly, he is often depicted with an anchor, and many churches in port towns intended to minister chiefly to mariners are named for him.

The Epistle of Clement to The Corinthians (also called *I Clement*) can be found in collections of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, such as the Penguin Paperback *Early Christian Writings*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth. The letter is commonly dated around 96 AD, but an earlier date is suggested by John Robinson in his *Redating the New Testament*.

The letter is occasioned by the fact that a group of Christians at Corinth had banded together against their leaders and had deposed them from office. Clement writes to tell them that they have behaved badly, and to remind them of the importance of Christian unity and love. He speaks at length of the way in which each kind of official in the church has his own function for the good of the whole. The letter is an important witness to the early Christian understanding of Church government, but an ambiguous witness in that we are never told precisely why the Corinthians had deposed their leaders, and therefore the letter can be read as saying that presbyters ought not to be deposed without reasonable grounds, or as saying that they cannot be deposed on any grounds at all.

The letter refers only to the presbyters of Corinth, and makes no reference to the bishop of Corinth. Moreover, there is no mention of a bishop at Rome--the letter is sent as from the Church at Rome collectively, and Clement's name does not appear. From this, some have inferred that the office of bishop had not yet developed at either Rome or Corinth, and that in both congregations the office of presbyter was the highest office known. A probable alternate explanation, however, is that the troubles in Corinth had arisen when the bishop of that congregation had died, and the congregation had split into factions, none containing both a majority of the presbyters and a majority of the congregation.

The letter makes no apology for intervening in what might be thought an internal affair of the congregation at Corinth. On the contrary, the writer apologizes for the delay in commenting, as if an earlier intervention might have been expected. From this, some have inferred that, even at this early date (96 AD or, some think, earlier), when the Apostle John was perhaps still alive, the authority and jurisdiction of the Roman congregation over every other congregation of the Christian Church was already universally conceded. However, a perfectly reasonable alternative explanation is that the congregation at Corinth, torn by division, had agreed to settle their disputes by inviting another congregation, or the head of another congregation, to act as arbitrator. This would be a reasonable thing to do, and the choice of Rome as that congregation was natural, partly because of the prestige of the city, and the prestige of one of the largest congregations in the Church, and because the Corinth of Clement's day

had been built as a Roman colony, with a special dependence directly on the city of Rome (a civil relation that might affect the habits of thought of the Corinthians on matters ecclesiastical as well), but also because Rome was far enough away so that it could be assumed to be impartial and not affected by local personalities.