

Session 3

The Apostolic Fathers (c.95CE to c.150CE)

Following the apostolic period, which ended around 110CE, the Church - scattered across the eastern Mediterranean - faced the challenge of living in a Roman world surrounded by indifferent paganism and the frequent hostility of traditional Judaism. The early Christians seemed, to those around them, to either have a new god - who might simply be added to the Roman pantheon of deities - or to be denying the most fundamental belief of the Jewish faith: that God was One and Indivisible.

This was a time of persecution when many Christians were martyred.¹

The earliest of these Fathers had known the apostles² and had been their followers, and so are given the name 'Apostolic Fathers'.

What questions did these early Christians face?

We can, of course, imagine that they were still wondering whether the end-time would come soon, although as the years passed it would have become clearer that the end was not yet in sight.

So they had to think about *how to continue*.

Much of their teaching, contained in letters, continued on from that of the apostles, which is helpful to us for two reasons:

- it clarified what the apostles *meant* by what they wrote
- it added to the apostles' teaching things that were taught but had not been written down

The first writing of the Apostolic Fathers overlaps the period of the apostles: Clement's *Letter to the Corinthians* (96CE, around the time the gospel of John was completed).

Clement was leader of the church in Rome. He had witnessed the first persecutions of Christians under the Emperor Nero, in which Peter and Paul had died, and now he was faced with a new wave of persecution³ which was tearing the first Christian communities apart.

In Corinth, some of the younger Christians no longer trusted the elders and wanted to take control themselves. But who had the authority to lead a community: was it the elders appointed by the apostles themselves, or could new leaders arise and be accepted because they were popular with the majority?

¹ Persecution was sporadic, coming from Jewish and Roman authorities. We find examples already in the New Testament: for many Jews the objections were clear; for the pagan authorities it was the imagined threat to social order posed by recalcitrant Christians

² or had learned their teaching through some direct contact e.g. through their co-workers, like Barnabas

³ under the Emperor Domitian (81CE to 96CE)

The Authority to Lead

You may have heard the term *Apostolic Succession* - we use it when speaking about the authority of bishops⁴ to lead the communities entrusted to them.

It isn't a term which has come out of nowhere: it comes from Clement.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Clement pointed out that, in Rome - where both Peter and Paul had taught and died - it had always been made clear that the apostles wanted an orderly handing on of authority in the Church: leaders could not appoint themselves or be decided by a popularity contest. Clement called on the Corinthians to return to the authentic teaching of the apostles.

His letter is important for two reasons:

- it explains how authority in the Church should be handed on from generation to generation
- it demonstrates for the first time the leadership of Rome and that catholicity depends on remaining close to that leadership and its authority⁵

The Church as Catholic

The word *Catholic* is one we have touched on already. It's easy to imagine that it's the **name** of the Church, but it isn't: it's the **description** of the Church: it means *united*; one Church wherever it may be.

The first person we know to have used the word is **Ignatius** of Antioch⁶ who was bishop there immediately after the time of Peter and Paul. Both apostles⁷ had lived and taught in Antioch so - like Rome - it was a place of special authority in the early Church. Ignatius wrote letters to other Church communities around the eastern Mediterranean, which suggests that he understood that he had a responsibility to guide and teach these communities, and to hold them together in catholic unity.

We see from those letters that the churches to which Ignatius wrote all had the same structure of authority: one bishop; a number of presbyters (priests), and also deacons, all serving the local Christian community. We also notice that, in his letter to the Romans⁸, he

⁴ and, through them, priests

⁵ In fact, as we shall see, the early Church had three key centres (Rome, Alexandria and Antioch) to which were later added Constantinople and Jerusalem. Throughout, Rome was recognised as first among these because the apostles Peter and Paul had both taught and died there

⁶ Dates unknown, though he was martyred in the earlier part of the 2nd century CE, perhaps as early as 108CE or as late as c.140CE

⁷ and Barnabas too

⁸ written shortly before he was martyred there. Ignatius is the earliest Christian writer to 'speak' in his own words about his approaching martyrdom

writes in a different tone, suggesting that he had a reverence for Rome and an understanding of its primacy.

Jesus: human and divine

There were some among the earliest Christians who struggled to believe that Jesus could be both God and man. Ignatius' Letter to the Ephesians, written as he was journeying to Rome to be martyred, sets out beautifully the Faith of the Church:

But our Physician is the Only true God, the unbegotten and unapproachable, the Lord of all, the Father and Begetter of the only-begotten Son. We have also as a Physician the Lord our God, Jesus the Christ, the only-begotten Son and Word, before time began, but who afterwards became also man, of Mary the virgin. For "the Word was made flesh". Being incorporeal, He was in the body; being impassible, He was in a passible body; being immortal, He was in a mortal body; being life, He became subject to corruption, that He might free our souls from death and corruption, and heal them, and might restore them to health, when they were diseased with ungodliness and wicked lusts.

Letter to the Ephesians 7 (longer version)

Indeed, in his letters, Ignatius calls Jesus 'God' *sixteen times*.

But did that mean that Jesus was not really a human being? The Roman world was full of tales of gods who had taken human form (Jupiter [Zeus] was said to have done so many times), so Ignatius emphasised equally the *full humanity* of Jesus - that he was not God masquerading in human form, but was truly, fully a human being:

Jesus Christ, of David's lineage, of Mary; who was **really** born, ate and drank; was **really** persecuted under Pontius Pilate; was **really** crucified and died, in the sight of heaven and earth and the underworld. He was **really** raised from the dead, for his Father raised him, just as his Father will raise us, who believe in him.⁹

Letter to the Trallians 9

We begin to see in Ignatius the questions which would shape the faith of the Church over the coming centuries: here was the first generation of Christians relying on Scripture and the Tradition of the Church to hold true to the faith of the apostles.

⁹ I have highlighted in **bold** to show how Ignatius is emphasising his point

The Martyr as a Witness

Both Clement and Ignatius were martyred at Rome.

The word *martyr* itself means ‘witness’ but came to mean the specific witness of those who, remaining faithful to the end, had died in persecution: martyrdom continues today in some parts of the world, so it is not a thing of the past.

The earliest account of martyrdom is of Stephen in the *Acts of the Apostles*¹⁰, followed by the apostle James¹¹. The next written account of martyrdom is that of Polycarp, who died in 155CE, but we know of other martyrs from tradition: it is said that Clement died by being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea; Ignatius is said to have been thrown to the beasts.¹²

The Texts

The apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was God’s ambassador. Thus Christ from God and the apostles from Christ; both these dispositions originated in an orderly way from God’s will. Having thus received their mandate and fully convinced by the resurrection of Lord Jesus Christ, and committed to the Word of God, they went forth with the full assurance of the Holy Spirit, announcing the good news that the Kingdom of God was close at hand. Preaching from country to country and from city to city, they established some of their first followers as *episcopoi* (bishops) and *diakonoi* (deacons) of the future believers, after having tested them by the Spirit.

Clement, Letter to the Corinthians 42

Our apostles were also given to know by Jesus Christ our Lord that the name *episcopus* would give rise to rivalries. This is why, endowed as they were with a perfect knowledge, they established the men mentioned above and for the future laid down the rule that, after their death, other approved men should succeed them in their office. Therefore, those who are established by them or later by other eminent men with the consent of the whole Church, and have served Christ’s flock faultlessly, humbly... we judge it an injustice to deprive them of their office... For it will be no small sin if we eject from the episcopacy those who have offered the gifts piously and without reproach.

ibid, 44

¹⁰ Acts 6:8-8:1

¹¹ Acts 12:2

¹² A belief attested by Irenaeus and Origen

Each one individually and all of you together are united in one and the same faith in Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, in obedience to the bishop and the *presbyterium*, in harmony, breaking one loaf of bread which is the medicine of immortality, an antidote to death that gives eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 20,2

One who truly possesses Christ's words can also hear his silence in order to be perfect... Nothing is hidden from the Lord but our very secrets are close to him. Let us do everything in him who dwells in us so that we may become his temples.

ibid, 15:1-3

I am writing to all the Christians to tell all of them that I am gladly going to die for God... Let me be the food of beasts thanks to which I shall be able to find God. I am God's wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts in order to become Christ's pure bread... By suffering I shall be a freedman of Jesus Christ and I shall be born again in him, free... let no being, visible or invisible, prevent me out of jealousy from finding Christ. Let fire and cross, wild animals, torture, dislocation of my bones, mutilation of my limbs, the grinding to pieces of my whole body, the worst assaults of the devil fall on me, provided only that I find Jesus Christ... My new birth is close at hand. Forgive me, brethren, do not hinder me from living. Let me come into the pure light. When I reach that point I shall be a man. Allow me to understand what I desire and take pity on me, knowing what it is that straitens me... My earthly desires have been crucified. There is no longer in me any fire to love material objects, only living water that murmurs within me, 'Come to the Father'... It is the bread of God that I desire, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ... and for drink I desire his blood, which is imperishable love.

Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans 4-7

Reflection

When you think about authority in the Church, what comes to mind? Is authority something with which you feel comfortable, or do you feel there is a tension - which can be creative! - between authority and your own life of faith?

How can you witness to your faith? Is there a wider meaning to martyrdom for you?

What do you feel, reading the texts of the earliest Christians? Do you feel close to their faith and the ways in which they express it?