

Proper 15, 2006

John 6: 51-58

While vacationing in British Columbia this summer in addition to the majestic mountains, lakes and rivers, evergreen forests and beautiful coastline, there were many vestiges of Native American culture, such as the totem poles. I was and am fascinated by cultural tradition, ritual celebration of the seasons of our lives and the totem poles tell the story of a culture different from my own.

Explorers from Europe who arrived in the Northwest by sea found large wooden carvings with symbolic figures. Recorded in journals and letters from early 1700s these totem poles were of much earlier vintage. There is some evidence of mask dance ceremonies, family crests, and totems date to AD1000. The roots of totemic figures are found in prehistoric objects recovered from archeological excavations. Each animal or human figure is a symbol of the history of the clan, tribe, nation, or family. The lowest figure on the totem is the most important since they are at eye-level to observers and are carved with great attention to detail.

Several factors caused the rapid decline and eventual hiatus of the large totem pole carving after 1900. The scourge of smallpox from 1832 onward decimated the population some estimates are that less than 10% of the tribes survived the epidemic. The other influential factor was the missionary impact on the native practices, which began in the mid-1800s. Though totem poles served as heraldic crests and story figures they were never worshiped but the missionaries mistook the poles for pagan symbols. Pole building ceased in areas where missionaries were active. In time the government of Canada began to preserve and restore the totem poles that could be found and place them in public centers, parks, and yet much of the legacy was lost. Dormant for 50 years, totem building was revived in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1956 a team raised the world's then tallest totem pole 38.9 meters (*127 feet 7 inches) in Beacon Hill Park, Victoria and dedicated it to Canada's WWII Native war veterans.

In the 1980s the Natives began to operate their own tourism industry, reconstructing villages, totem parks, and telling their own story to people interesting in the heritage. The tallest pole is now 173 feet (52.7metres) and stands at Alert Bay, British Columbia. Northwest Coast Native art continues its slow renaissance.

On some poles it is easy to determine the top and bottom of each creature. In other cases the figures are overlapping such that it makes it difficult to determine what is the beginning of one figure and the end of another. Eyes are defined by eyebrows or by eye sockets that are pinched to a point at both sides and circular staring ahead. Eyes are positioned somewhere near mouths. Ovoid shapes are decorations used to fill spaces in other regions of the poles. Sometimes an ovoid space is mistaken for an eye or a hidden creature. Totem poles come in many shapes and sizes; tall freestanding poles are complex and represent the village story, are designed collaboratively but carved under the direction of a master carver. Short poles may illustrate a single story, e.g. the Beaver clan who trade in Beaver pelts. Frontal poles were carved into the load bearing post of the longhouse. Some welcome poles are human figures with arms outstretched, others with arms down and hands outward.

When I stand and look at these giant structures with the colors, faces, hands, animal and human figures interwoven, I am a stranger to their symbolism. I buy books and read about the totem to understand the heritage, the symbolism, but I can never really appreciate the legacy each one represents to the family or tribe or nation. I look on from a distance, impressed, even touched by the beauty, but unaware of the whole story.

John 6 as we have inherited it in the fourth Gospel is as complex as the totem poles. John opens the chapter with the feeding of the crowd with two small barley loaves and two fish with baskets of leftovers, a sea crossing, and the crowd following him for more bread.

In the bread of life discourse that follows and fills three Sunday lections, we have Jesus analogy with his own body as the bread of life that endures to eternity. It is the self gift woven of one fabric with many colored threads and we often fail to see the multidimensional levels of meaning and tradition in it. Too often we see Jesus as the teacher and healer whose primary gift was the salvific sacrifice on the cross. We emphasize faith as adherence to Jesus and eternal life with God, but we diminish his manner of life we are called to follow. To understand the passage in John's Gospel we must seek to understand its original context.

The community was in conflict with the local synagogues and John is seeking to legitimate the Christian faith (in what we would today call apologetic style). The chapter begins with material from the Signs source (meaning the ways in which Jesus is known to be the son of God and the full revelation of God in human form). John 6 is exegesis of Jewish Scripture (Exodus 16:4 "God said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.'" Isa 54:9-55:4 "This is like the days of Noah to me: Just as I swore that the waters of Noah would never again go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed but my steadfast love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you. . . . Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me: listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant my steadfast sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples."), following the pattern and form of a Jewish sermon.

The key passage of John 6 is the Old Testament paraphrase "he gave them bread to eat" and Jesus is emphasizing that He is not Moses but God who gave them manna. Do not read X but Y: do not understand that Moses gave you bread, but that God sent manna from heaven. Likewise it is God who is being manifest in the person of Jesus. The discussion is about the source of the bread, which is one of the divine interventions of the Exodus experience, which shaped the Hebrew faith.

The crowd followed Jesus to the other side of the lake because he gave them bread. They asked for a sign in keeping with the tradition – like the manna they received from Moses. Jesus corrects the source of the bread and adds, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of Yahweh." Jesus also said, I am the bread of life. The bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. In the Wisdom literature, manna or bread from heaven is identified with Word or Wisdom of God. God's wisdom or word is also identified with Torah, and thus manna became the symbol of Torah. Jesus claiming to be the bread of life is then saying he is also the Word of God and the Wisdom of God. The opening hymn of John captures it in a single verse: the Word became flesh.

The I Am declaration by Jesus is important in the structure and language of John's Gospel. Seven times, John has Jesus use the phrase, the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush: I am that I am is God's own name for Godself. When Jesus uses the phrase, it is clear to those trained in Jewish tradition that God is being named and in using the term to refer to himself, Jesus is owning his divine nature – the Son of the Father – the second person of the Trinity. In time the claim that Jesus is God would be the point of division between Jews and Christians for one group it would mean breaking the supreme first commandment of monotheism – the Lord your God is One – you shall have no other gods before me. For Christians the theological construction of Christology would solve the monotheistic question by

making Jesus both divine and human, the Word incarnate, and the doctrine of the Trinity would synthesize the Father, Son and Spirit into one God avoiding the critical issue of worshipping One God. It would remain the issue of separation between the people of the first covenant from those of the new covenant. Other sayings of Jesus ought to be remembered here: if you knew the father you would know me; the father and I are one; so it is terribly important in this day of war with so much religious undertones that we recognize the unity of God above our distinctions.

Scholars differ about the symbolism of the bread discourse in terms of the Christian Eucharist. Some feel that later tradition has been read into the passage, while others believe that the reference to Jesus giving his flesh alludes to his death and also to the Eucharist. To believe in Jesus includes believing in his words, in his status as God's agent and Word, in his death as a redemptive act designed by God for reconciliation with all the world, and celebrated in table fellowship. Meals in the ancient world were important and bore symbolic significance. The unity of believers with Christ and one another was symbolized in the table fellowship. We must not miss the connection between the bread of life and the cry of the hungry for bread. The one who gave himself for the life of the world also taught: "blessed are you who hunger, for you shall be satisfied" (Luke 6:21) and "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice" (Matt 5:6). The two must not be divorced because the bread of life we are given for spiritual nourishment is also the body of the one whose being is love and compassion.

John's Gospel is very symbolic. Jesus gives water – living water – bread – living bread and enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey – all three items required in Messianic expectation by the Jewish tradition. John is the only Gospel of the four we have in the Bible that uses all three of these symbolic prophetic images to set forth the claim that Jesus is the wisdom and word of God.

Moses led and taught the people, faithful to God's call. The people understood that Moses was the agent of God because of the manna and the commandments. Jesus gives his very being – the Word becomes flesh – the flesh dies and is raised and ascends back to its spiritual origin in the Triune God. The flesh is new manna and it is spiritual food for spiritual renewal – so that the work of God can continue in this world. We are not fed with word and sacrament for our inner contentment but for the mission of God in the world. The Incarnate Word has carved into our minds as the human image of God.

Jesus is a totem of the Christian faith – complex, multifaceted, compelling and inviting. The love of God reaches out to us today as the hands of Jesus welcomed all who came into his reach, so must our hands become his hands in our day – serving the least with the same undifferentiated and unconditional love that drew us to the heart of God.