

Sermon for the Patronal Festival, 22nd June 2025

I can't read ancient Greek. I think I may have mentioned this fact to you before. In this I am in excellent company. Virginia Woolf once wrote an essay entitled "On Not Knowing Greek", and so I feel a certain solidarity with her on that score. Nonetheless, the New Testament is written in a form of ancient Greek, and now and then I make another effort to learn the language so I can read it in the original text.

Whenever I do, I return to a copy of a textbook which hangs around my study, and I set myself to work through the opening chapters. I currently progress at the rate of a chapter a year – by which I mean each year I get one chapter further through the book before giving up, so maybe in a couple of decades I'll be through the whole thing. This means that I keep coming back to the first verb that the textbook teaches you. It's a very regular verb with an easy form to follow, and it's "luo". Luo, lues, luei, luomen, luete, luestin. I untie, you untie, he/she/it unties, we untie, you (plural) all untie, they untie. There you are, you've now got about six month's worth of ancient Greek under your belts, if you're on my schedule. Congratulations.

And I must admit that this didn't not seem the most useful verb to learn first of all. It's not like Latin, where they start by teaching you things like to build, to attack, to sail, all those verbs that go so far to explaining why a minor dialect in the Italian peninsula is the basis of entire other languages across the world. Or in French, where they teach you verbs like to love, to have, to be, and equip you for a life of erotically-charged existential crises. But in the dialect of late ancient Greek called Koine, which is the language of the New Testament, they teach you "luo".

In fact there's more logic to that than I had thought. It's a usefully regular verb, but it also starts your knowledge of the language at the beginning of the

story you're going to want to read. It starts your knowledge of ancient Greek with John the Baptist, our patron saint. That statement he makes about the one who will come after him:

Erchetai, as my interlinear Bible informs me John the Baptist declared, *erchetai met eme hou ouk eimi axios to hupodema ton podon lusia*. After me comes the one, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie. That's one of the delights of going into the text, even if – like me – you have to do with an interlinear translations and a dictionary. You start recognising bits of words which we still have. *Lusia*, for a start, which is the form of *luo* used here, took centuries and centuries to get through other languages but it ended up as the word “to loose” in English. Then we have “*axios*”. It means worthy, and in the Greek Orthodox Church, when a priest or deacon is ordained and presented to the congregation they will shout “*axios!*”, meaning “this one is worthy!” In English we still have this word - “*axiom*” or “*axiomatic*”, something which is seen as worthy of belief by everyone. And then we have “*podon*”, feet. In English, the “*podon*” are what the pedestrian walks upon, before perhaps needing a pedicure or even the attention of a podiatrist.

This kind of etymological reading, digging into the words and seeing where we still have them, does not produce a very good English translation, but I find it fascinating – it reminds me how our world is made up of the Bible's language. Our saint nobly declares that it is axiomatic that he is not the Messiah's podiatrist

And that verb, “untie”, links John the Baptist to the messiah he is talking about. There is a very Biblical irony in our saint declaring that he is not worthy to untie the messiah's sandals, not worthy even to perform the most menial act of welcome in a household. Because Jesus, of course, does exactly

that for his disciples at the Last Supper. The night that he was arrested, Jesus untied their shoes and washed their feet, despite the protests which Simon Peter made. The example which John the Baptist used to show how far below Jesus he was, is precisely the symbol of servanthood and humility which Jesus carried out on that last night.

Perhaps it's ironic, because it shows that John could not quite grasp the meaning of the Messiah whose reign he was proclaiming. Perhaps it's perfectly apt, because every time we remember John's denial we remember what Jesus did on the night he was betrayed. That act which told us something about the humility and servanthood which was involved in being the Christ.

And that image of untying does not stop there. When Jesus asks his disciples who people think he is, and then who they think he is, Peter answers "you are the Christ, the Son of God". Jesus tells him that he is "Peter", petros, the rock, and on this rock will the church be built, and then he says

Kai hosa ean lusete epi tes ges estai lulemena en to ourano

...and whatsoever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven

There it is again. "lusete" "lulemena"; what you untied here "epi tes ges", on the earth, as in "geology" and "geography", shall be untied in heaven. A few chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus uses the same formulation, telling his disciples they had the power to bind and loose. Jesus is entrusting the power to declare sins forgiven to his disciples, to his Church. It is a serious matter. It is a rite which everyone here has been through already, when we confessed and were given absolution at the beginning of the service. When

Father Paul declared God's forgiveness, he was undertaking that role which Jesus gave in these passage – the job of loosing, the great untying.

So perhaps that verb is a good one to start with when looking at the language of the Bible. It puts at with our patron saint, John the Baptist. With it we can proclaim the kingdom of the Messiah, the one whose sandals our saint was not worthy to untie. But once we have made that proclamation, it takes us deeper into the terrible and wonderful paradox of the Messiah who is proclaimed, to the night of his arrest when he stooped and untied the sandals himself. And it pulls us on, into recognising that untying from sin and binding which was undertaken in the following days, as Christ died and rose again. And further, into seeking that untying in the world around us, receiving it from the Church and sharing it with others. The Gospel is a tricky thing. Start tugging on an untied sandal-lace, and you don't know where it will take you.

Amen.