

# Odysseus' Voyage: What We Can Learn From Homer's Everyman

Lovers of Monty Python will recall the scene in *The Life of Brian* in which John Cleese, Eric Idle and Michael Palin discuss the contribution of the Romans to civilization: "What have the Romans ever done for us?" In today's supercilious culture we tend to believe that we owe nothing to the past in general and to past civilizations in particular. What have the Romans ever done for us, or, for that matter, the Greeks?

Modernity, it seems, is intent on forgetting the past or burying it, much like the contemptible cad who kicks down the ladder by which he's climbed. This being so, it might prove helpful to take a look at Homer's Odysseus. What on earth has a fictional character, or, at any rate, a legendary character, to do with us? What of any value has an ancient Greek warrior wandering the known world three thousand years ago, as told by a poet who is almost as ancient, to teach us about the real world in which we find ourselves?

Nothing, we might think, or at least very little.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Odysseus has a great deal to teach us because he is one of us, not in the vague or abstract sense in which he is a human being, but in the concrete way in which he shows us who we are. In showing us Odysseus, Homer shows us ourselves.

Odysseus serves as an image of *homo viator*. Man on a journey. Travelling man. Man on a quest. His journey reflects the journey on which all of us are embarked. Our life is indeed a journey, as our life story is indeed a story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end, like all good journeys and all good stories. It has a purpose, which is to achieve the goal, ultimately to reach that place which we call home, that place

where we belong, the place where we love and are loved. The place that our heart desires and towards which it strives.

Along the way, we will face challenges and setbacks. We will make mistakes and, if we learn from them, we will make progress by not repeating them. We will learn that humility leads to wisdom and growth and that pride precedes a fall. We will learn to respect both God and neighbor, which the Greeks enshrined in the law of *xenia*, the law which demands hospitality between host and guest and which demands respect for the stranger.

We will learn, as Odysseus does, that the bigger we think we are the smaller we really are, and that the smaller we think we are the greater we become. We will learn that humility is not only the beginning of wisdom but the beginning of the way home. We will learn that the journey requires self-sacrifice, which is merely another word for love, the laying down of ourselves for others and that, unless we make such sacrifices, no progress on the journey is possible.

So, let's return to our original question. What has Odysseus to do with us? The answer is that he has everything to do with us because he is who we are.