

EPISODE 9 – A Stranger in his Own Land

total running time: 14:01

A high-prowed ship (⊕ 5:16)

Odysseus stood in the bronze-floored feasting hall of King Alcinous, looking at the king and the old blind storyteller, and there was a long silence. And then King Alcinous said, “Odysseus, you have suffered much in your wanderings across the broad face of the world, but now that you have reached my bronze-floored feasting hall I swear by the mighty gods that I will send a
5 high-prowed ship to carry you home to rocky Ithaca. And I swear by the mighty gods and goddesses you will not return home empty-handed.”

And great chests of treasure were brought into the feasting hall. And they were carried down to the quayside, where a ship was waiting. They were loaded onto the deck of the ship. And Odysseus himself was led down to the ship and he walked across the gangplank onto the deck
10 of it. And the sails were unfurled and the anchors were lifted, and the wind filled the sails like a great belly and the prow of the ship cut a path through the churning blue waves of the sea. And Odysseus lay down on the deck of that ship and he wrapped himself in his cloak and he closed his eyes and he fell into the sweet oblivious balm of sleep. And all that day he slept and he slept and he slept. And then the night came and the sky brightened with stars and still
15 Odysseus was fast asleep. And the moon rose, and the moon fell, and still Odysseus was sleeping.

And they reached the island of Ithaca and Odysseus was still fast asleep. And so the sailors lifted him tenderly in their arms and they waded ashore, and they set him down on the shingle beach. And they set the great chests of treasure beside him and they returned to the ship and
20 they sailed away.

But nothing is hidden from the eyes of the mighty gods and goddesses. And from the high slopes of Mount Olympus owl-eyed Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom, looked down and she saw Odysseus lying, sleeping. And Athene was fond of Odysseus and she was worried that he might come into some danger. And so she covered the island with a white, swirling
25 mist. And she strapped on her sandals of untarnishing gold, she seized her spear, she flashed down out of the sky until she was standing just a short distance from where Odysseus was lying fast asleep.

And then the sun rose and the light of the sun shone through the white mist. And the opaque light woke Odysseus and he rubbed his eyes and he looked about himself and all he could see
30 was mist. And he said, “Where am I? What is this place? Where has my bitter destiny driven me to now?” And then he saw standing, not far away, there was a figure and taking it for a shepherd or a fisherman, he said, “Stranger, tell me, where am I? What is this place?”

And Athene answered him in the voice of a man. She said, “You must be a fool or a dolt if you don’t know this place! This place is famous from Troy to the ocean streams, from the rising to
35 the setting of the sun – this is the island of Ithaca!”

And Odysseus peered through the mist and Athene walked towards him, her grey eyes shining

with light, her long limbs unblemished, and she said, “Noble Odysseus, you are home at last!”
And she reached down and she lifted the mist, as though she was lifting a curtain. And
Odysseus saw Mount Neriton and he saw the beetling rocks and the terraced fields and the
cliffs of his native land – his own homeland – and he threw himself down onto the ground and
40 he kissed the earth. And Athene shook his shoulders. She said, “Odysseus, quick there is no
time to be wasted. First of all we must hide these chests of treasure”, and she helped him lift
the great chests and they carried them to a cave. And she caused a great stone to roll in front
of the cave entrance.

***Unravelling at home* (🕒 3:07)**

And then she said, “Odysseus, listen, the situation is this. You are home alone, unknown,
under a strange sail and there is danger waiting where there should be a welcome. Sit down
and listen to me and I will tell you everything.

While you have been away, your wife Penelope has been waiting for you. But your feasting hall
5 has been invaded by suitors, men who want to marry her. And she cannot bring herself to
marry another man. And so she said she will only choose a new husband when she has
finished weaving a shroud for your father, old Laertes. And every day she sits at her loom, but
every night, by the light of the moon she unravels all that she has woven during the day and
that way she keeps the suitors at bay. But while those suitors are waiting, they are slaughtering
10 your cattle, Odysseus, they are drinking your wine. Every day they sit and they feast,
dishonouring your name. And your son, Telemachus, he has set off from Ithaca, disgusted by
the behaviour of those suitors, he has made a journey to Sparta searching for news of you,
Odysseus. And there he has met red-haired Menelaus, the king of Sparta, and beautiful Helen,
restored now to her rightful husband after the fall of Troy. For thirty days Telemachus has
15 stayed in their palace and red-haired Menelaus has told him all that he knows about your
journey home. But now Odysseus, those suitors, who have invaded your feasting hall, they are
planning to murder Telemachus when he comes home.”

And Odysseus drew his dagger from his belt. He said, “Goddess. If you would fight alongside
me now as you fought alongside us Greeks when we brought down Troy’s shining diadem of
20 towers, I swear the floors of my hall would soon run red with blood!”

But Athene touched his lips with her fingers and she said, “Shh, Odysseus, I had thought you
were becoming wise. This is no time for acts of daring folly.” And she reached and she touched
Odysseus’ shoulder with her hand. And as she touched him his shoulders stooped, the hawk-
like light went out of his eyes, his hair whitened, his arms grew thin, his hands trembling, he
25 was dressed in nothing but rags.

She said, “Odysseus, listen. You must go as an old beggar now. Do not go to your feasting
hall. Go rather to the hut of your faithful swineherd Eumaeus. Do not reveal yourself to him.
But listen and you will learn much.”

A beggar king and an absent prince (☉ 5:37)

And Odysseus, in the shape of an old beggar, nodded his head up and down and he turned and he hobbled up from the beach, up the slope of the hill. And Athene stood and she watched him for a while and then she turned on her heel and she flashed across the sea to Sparta, to the palace of red-haired Menelaus and beautiful Helen. And there was Telemachus in his bed,
5 covered with a crimson blanket, fast asleep. Athene stood beside the bed. She said, “Telemachus! Telemachus!” And Telemachus woke up with the little hairs on the back of his neck rising. He knew he was in the presence of one of the mighty gods or goddesses. He opened his eyes and there was Athene standing over the bed. She said, “Telemachus, listen. The time has come for you to go home. Your mother Penelope has been discovered by the
10 suitors, unravelling Laertes’ shroud by moonlight. And she has been forced to finish it. And now she must choose a new husband. You must go home, but be careful! The suitors are planning to murder you on your return. Do not go to your father’s feasting hall. Go rather to the hut of your faithful swineherd Eumaeus.”

And the goddess had vanished and Telemachus was left, filled with spirit and awe in the
15 knowledge that he’d been in the presence of one of the mighty goddesses. And straightaway he made preparations for his journey homewards.

Meanwhile, Odysseus, in the shape of an old beggar, was climbing the hill towards the hut of Eumaeus. And when Eumaeus saw the old beggar climbing the hill he threw open the doors of his hut and he said, “It has been decreed by mighty Zeus that anyone approaching one’s
20 threshold in peace should be welcomed. Old man, come inside, sit down.” And the swineherd showed the old beggar where he could sit and then he slaughtered a fatted hog. And when he had made sacrifices to the mighty gods and goddesses he roasted the meat over the flames of the fire and he gave the best cut, the sweet chine, to the old beggar. And gratefully the old beggar ate. And Eumaeus, the swineherd, sat down beside him and told him story, after story,
25 after story, of the outrages that had been committed by the suitors in Odysseus’ feasting hall.

And as Odysseus listened he felt the bile rising in his throat, he felt his heart pounding against his ribs. But he bit his lip and he swallowed and he said nothing. And when at last the swineherd fell silent, the old beggar turned and said, “In my travels, in my journeying from pillar to post and port to port, in many places I have heard rumours that Odysseus is on his way
30 home with chests filled with treasure.”

And Eumaeus shook his head. He said, “Old man, I can see you are trying to win your way into my heart with tittle-tattle and half-remembered gossip. No, Odysseus is dead! I feel it in my bones. His body is rolling somewhere deep beneath the blue waves of the sea.”

And so it was the beggar stayed with the swineherd. And every day when the swineherd took
35 his pigs to graze and rootle for truffles, Odysseus wandered the island. In the shape of an old beggar he climbed Mount Neriton, he wandered the vineyards and the hills, and the cliffs, and the beaches, his heart singing for joy to feel his homeland, his native land, against the soles of his feet.

And then on the morning of the fourth day, the swineherd was preparing breakfast for the two
40 of them, and the old beggar was sitting on a stool by the fire, when the door opened, and
standing framed in the doorway there was a young man with his first beard on his chin. And
when Eumaeus, the swineherd, saw the young man he dropped the bowl he was holding. He
said, "Telemachus! By the mighty gods you are safely home!" And he ran across and he threw
his arms around the young man's neck. He kissed the forehead, the left eye, the right eye, the
45 lips, the left hand, the right hand – like a father honouring his son, the swineherd honoured his
prince.

And Odysseus, sitting on the stool by the fire, saw his son for the first time for nineteen years.
And he said nothing.