Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the One who says it, our prayers do make a difference. Max Lucado.

December 22nd **The Shofar** Advent 4

Psalm 25 – a prayer for living

This psalm is among the most theological significant prayers in the entire psalter. It takes us immediately into the heart of its message: *Make known to me your ways, Lord; teach me your paths*. It seems to me that an answer to this prayer would just automatically take care of anything else that could come up in my life.

A few lines later the psalmist asks, *Remember your compassion and your mercy, O Lord*. Of course, we know that God does not forget, and we are so lucky to receive God's grace in every moment of our lives. What is helpful is to have a psalm like this to remind ***us***.

Throughout the psalm, we are reminded of the many gifts God gives us, and that is a blessing. But the psalmist does lament over our troubles, too. For example, he mentions the fear of enemies, which is certainly a concern, even pointing out, "see how fiercely they hate me."

God is our guide and our strength

The Hebrew word *yasar* (v.8) means straight or right or upright being without guile. It carries the idea of genuine, straightforward, and honest. Yahweh is upright in that He does not come with a hidden agenda in his dealings with people. There can be no doubt as to the will of God for all creation. He has revealed it to us:

- He revealed himself and his expectations clearly in the law and the prophets.
- He revealed himself more fully in the person of Jesus Christ.
- He continues to reveal himself through the scriptures.
- He continues to reveal himself in the life and work of the church.

On top of all of that, Yahweh is upright in that he keeps his promises. He is trustworthy:

- That sometimes happens slowly, as it did with Abraham, who was young when God made a covenant promise (Genesis 12:2) and old when the promise was fulfilled (Genesis 21:1-5).
- God sometimes fulfills promises in unexpected ways. If we are not watching with eyes of faith, we might miss seeing them. That is our failure in faith.
- We live in faith that God, who has been faithful in this life, will continue to be faithful both now and in the life to come.

therefore he will instruct sinners in the way. The word *yarah* usually means throw or shoot and is sometimes used in the Old Testament for shooting arrows. It seems peculiar that the psalmist would use *yarah* in this verse. My best guess is that the psalmist is expressing his faith that Yahweh will lead sinners along his way following a path that is as straight and as unwavering as an arrow in flight.

Derek (way) is often used for a path or road. In this verse, it describes Yahweh as *leading sinners* onto the pathway that is in keeping with his divine plan for that person's life. Each of us has a God-given pathway to faithfulness and by the grace of God we can find it and follow it. This recalls these words from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

Enter in by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter in by it. How narrow is the gate, and restricted is the way that leads to life! Few are those who find it (Matthew 7:13-14; and Luke 13:24).

He will guide the humble (Hebrew: *anaw*) **in justice** (Hebrew: *mispat*) (v. 9a).

The word humble (*anaw*—also translated meek or gentle) can easily be misunderstood as meaning timid or of low self-esteem. But we are not created to be doormats for the bullies of this world. That is far from the Biblical meaning of *anaw*. The Bible described Moses as *very anaw, more so than anyone else on earth* (Numbers 12:3). Moses demonstrated his

anaw at the burning bush, where he was afraid to look at God (Exodus 3:6). He protested, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh*? (Exodus 3:11). Finally, in desperation, he said, *O Lord, I am not eloquent, …for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue* (Exodus 4:10).

Humble though he might be in God's presence, Moses was anything but timid when he appeared before Pharaoh. He did not hesitate to act, even though his actions brought about plagues to devastate the Egyptians. His gentleness resurfaced when the Israelites made the golden calf and Moses prayed to God for their lives (Exodus 32:11-14). On that occasion he was not timid even in God's presence, but argued persuasively that God should spare the people. But then he broke the tablets in anger when he found the people dancing at the foot of the mountain. He forced the Israelites to grind the golden calf to dust, mix it with water, and drink it—converting gold to dung. Moses was *anaw*, but hardly weak or indecisive.

The Greek equivalent to *anaw* is *praus* which is translated "meek" in Matthew 5:5—"Blessed are the meek." Jesus described himself as "*praus* and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). Matthew described Jesus as a king, "*praus*, and riding on a donkey" (Matthew 21:5). Jesus modelled *praus* at his trial, where he refused to defend himself. He was poised and in control but refused to make claims for himself or to mount a defence.

However, we can hardly call Jesus weak or timid. He upended moneychangers' tables and used a whip to drive animals from the temple. He lashed Pharisees with his tongue. He exercised authority over illness and demons. He taught with authority. Hardly meek as we usually think of meek!

If Moses and Jesus are models of *anaw* and *praus*, their behaviour suggests the true meaning of these words. Neither Moses nor Jesus was ambitious for personal enrichment. Both, however, were forceful when it came to upholding a principle or protecting the vulnerable. We might conclude, then, that *anaw* and *praus* should be translated "***not*** self-seeking," rather than "meek." But more important still was the source of their strength. Both Moses and Jesus knew themselves to be working, not by human strength, but by the power of God. Such a person can work quietly—confidently—certain that they, with God's help, will prevail. Strong and meek.

Justice (Hebrew: *mispat*) involves bringing people into a right relationship with Yahweh and each other, and these right relationships produce righteous lives. By keeping both divine expectations in mind, by having them shape the way we live in the world with others, we produce the fruits of righteousness, fruit God wants the world to experience through us.

God's law provides very specific guidance with regard to ***just*** behaviour. It requires witnesses to be honest and impartial (Exodus 23:1-3, 6-8). It requires special consideration for widows, orphans, for those forced to the margins, those rejected by the community; justice demands that we love the unlovable, forgive the wicked who repent, be prepared to die that the other may live and make our priority the vulnerable people around us (Deuteronomy 24:17). While Israel is always tempted to define its service to God by the performance of cultic duties (ritual sacrifice, Sabbath observance, etc.), the prophets keep reminding them that **justice** is a more basic duty of the faith community (Micah 6:8). God's people are to be defined as a people "doing" justice.

He will teach the humble his way (v. 9b). The humble are receptive to learning—the proud much less so. I feel certain that Yahweh would be happy to teach both humble and proud his way—but only the humble are likely to learn and to follow.

Please Lord, teach me *your* paths

Psalm 86:11 has a similar message, one that should assist us in establishing a spiritual agenda for our Christian living in the coming new year. It reads *Teach me, O Lord, your ways, that I might walk in your truth*. To walk means, in this context, to live each day. The psalmist is not asking for God to impact only his religious life. Rather, he wants to be guided each and every day by divine truth. He seeks to put aside the false "truths" of the world and be guided by God.