Have you ever considered giving up?

A cross word puzzle where you can’t get on the wavelength of the person who constructed the clues

A book which you never managed to read regularly enough so that you became hooked on the story line.

A touch of DIY, or a piece of furniture, which you have to assemble at, home where either a piece is missing, or the hole is in the wrong place.

These are comparatively trivial. Other aspects of life are more serious; you may have struggled to pass an exam, spending hours poring over books and attending lectures but to no avail.

Or perhaps you are finding it difficult to secure a good job despite all the preparation you have done in composing your CV, contacting the right people and making sue you are presentable before you go to interview.

We all know how difficult it is for those in our community who are farming, struggling to make ends meet, and despite all their effort seeming to have nothing to show for it as the debts mount. - It would be so much simpler just to give up.

About 20 years ago one of the most successful song writers of our generation recorded a song “Someone saved my life tonight” after he was on the verge of suicide, you see success can bring its own isolation and despair.

Perhaps you are your wits end, even seriously questioning whether God exists at all because of the way that everything seems to be working against you.

The idea of giving up came vividly to me when I was about 2/3rds of the way through the Great North Run last week. Although 9 miles were behind me, there were still 4 to go - it was hot, my legs ached and the psychological games had started,

        could I really run that far

        other people were starting to walk so why not me

To make matters worse Greta was by this stage at least 2 miles ahead of me.

And as I was thinking about this, I was reminded that Paul referred to the Christian Life as a race. Not a sprint to which I was more adept in my youth, but a marathon in which he encourages Christians in the early Church to keep their eyes on the prize and not to be disheartened by their circumstances and the trials and tribulations which they were experiencing.

I think Paul chose this analogy very carefully. There must have been occasions when he wondered whether the hostility he was experiencing, the barracking from a hostile crowd, beatings from magistrates who were trying to keep the peace, imprisonment, and the constant threat to life and limb was worth it - yet in his letter to the Philippians Paul explains to his readers that his sole goal is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection . Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”

 This idea of God’s calling came through very clearly when I read the Gospel reading. Isn’t it amazing how you can come across passages which are comparatively unknown. Before looking at the gospel, I could not recall this incident in Jesus’ ministry, and neither for that matter could my brother in law who is a Baptist minister or other members of the leadership team here!

Now the first aspect that struck me was how strange it was that some Pharisees were coming to Jesus to warn him that Herod planned to stone him.

Earlier in his gospel Luke recounts the story of when Jesus was invited to dine with the Pharisees. You can read it in chapter 11. Now normally people are very civil to their host, it is etiquette. I can recall an occasion when I steadfastly ate an omelette which someone had cooked for me, even though I hadn’t eat egg since I was 5, as I didn’t want to hurt their feelings. However this was not Jesus’ way.

He criticised the Pharisees for

      their evil thoughts towards him,

      their neglect of justice, and the way that their love for God had waned

      their empty piety, coupled with their pride

      their hypocrisy

      their acquiescence when God’s messengers were murdered

Against this backdrop it is surprising that any of the Pharisees would seek to warn Jesus about Herod’s plots.

Yet when you stand back, their allegations do not hold water.

Herod had murdered John the Baptist, but reluctantly as he was initially fascinated and subsequently frightened by John’s power.  Remember that Herod ruled because the Romans were prepared to have a puppet in power, Israel was an unruly place, and by arresting Jesus Herod would have risked an outright rebellion, as Jesus was so popular.

Herod was also keen to get some kudos by “knowing” Jesus. When Jesus was ultimately arrested Herod was only interested because he wanted to see the miracles at first hand so that he could brag to his friends.

Now the reason that the Pharisees were seeking to dissuade Jesus from proceeding to Jerusalem was because they realised that his popular support could only become much stronger. If they managed to isolate him in the provinces, perhaps his appeal would wane.

The Pharisees were tempting Jesus, offering him a way out, after all what is the point of going to a city if you know that you are unlikely to escape alive. It must have been attractive, Jesus had a successful ministry in Galilee and Samaria; people were flocking to see him, he was popular, feted wherever he went; those who had been lame from birth, or blind, were healed, in contrast the alternative was almost too painful to contemplate.

Many prophets had gone before him to Jerusalem, the city of peace, and had perished. Recall Zechariah who warned people that as a consequence of their disobedience, God had forsaken them - and was stoned by order of the king.

In contrast Jesus knew that he had a ministry to complete, and that was taking him to Jerusalem which is why he emphasised this aspect of his ministry, bringing physical and spiritual healing on an on going basis.

Jesus was not prepared to give up and turn aside to save his own skin. Instead he persisted with his mission, to gather all people to God.

What a powerful image it is this idea of God acting like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings, running around, coaxing us in the right direction, heading off those who are forging ahead, and tarrying to ensure the stragglers keep up. The hen never rests until her brood is safe, and that is the way that God cares for us.

In Psalm 145 - a psalm of praise to God, David wrote

vs. 13-14 “ The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving towards all who he has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall, and lifts up all those who are bowed down”

This is the same person who experienced life’s lows,

One minute a hero for killing Goliath and the next on the run, branded an outlaw and a traitor by a jealous king who was determined to destroy him,

A father who watched helplessly by as his child died because of David’s disobedience and sinfulness.

A king whose sons rebelled against him, who tried to take the throne by force, but still wept bitterly when Absalom was killed.

The same person who dared to question God, In the opening verses of Psalm 22 David cries

“My God, my god why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?

O my God I cry out by day but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent“

You get the impression of someone who feels that they have been abandoned by God, yet in the very hour of despair, when their faith is being most tested, they are seeking God as he recognises that God is the only one who can meet his needs. He remembers that “Our fathers trusted and you delivered the. They cried to you and were saved.

Perhaps you are in that place of desolation this morning, ready to quit because life is getting you down. All the words of comfort offered by your friends seem so trite. You are angry at your situation, others, and even God.

Yet in this Psalm we get permission, if we need any, to express our emotions, not to bottle them up inside. To be honest with God, to question him. God knows about all those things which are troubling us and is waiting patiently for us to bring them to him.

There is a wonderful poster of a frog half way down the gullet of a pelican, yet somehow he has managed to get his arms free and is holding the Pelican’s neck tight, literally for dear life as it is the only thing which is stopping him being swallowed.

I was reminded of that this week when I read a short article in the paper reporting that a climber, who had been missing for 4 days in the Scottish highlands, had been found. He had fallen down a waterfall while descending from the mountains, and although badly injured had climbed into his survival bag and by using a torch and whistle tried to attract attention.

Others in a similar situation would have perished, but he was convinced that he would be found - in time. So whatever you do, wherever you are spiritually remember don’t give up.

**Simon de Bell**