

**Alice Gerth** explores the pain of miscarriage and why society and the church struggle to acknowledge its all-too-common pain



# WHY ME?

## THE SILENT QUESTION HIDDEN IN OUR CHURCH PEWS

### key points

- Miscarriage is incredibly common, ending 25% of all pregnancies, but also seldom discussed.
- Modern cultural expectations on women add to the grief because it can seem to be a failure and a loss of control and autonomy.
- Scripture gives us many insights into how God sees this pain and is a starting point to helping us approach those affected with greater compassion and sensitivity.

The waiting room for the emergency gynae clinic is a strange place. The air is thick with nerves. No-one makes eye contact, conversations with partners are had in hushed tones. The walls covered with posters offering support and counselling services that only serve to reinforce the sense of inevitability. There's one poster in particular that stands out – it simply reads '1 in 4 pregnancies end in why me?' As I read and re-read the poster the question is not 'Why me?' but just 'Why?' Why does a God that 'knits us together in our mother's womb' allow the thread to get caught and the beautiful knitting to unravel into the mess of blood and tissue now leaving the body? Social media threads campaigning to protect the value of the unborn child painfully emphasised what was lost, part of me wanted to respond, 'I know, but must you rub it in?'

If one in four pregnancies end in 'why me?', then miscarriage affects many more than one in four. That is a lot of people asking 'why?'

Along with the 'why' came a sense of powerlessness. For many professional women children are something they'd like to have, but feel they need to wait for the right time. For us it was finishing my

'I knew, as I clutched my firstborn child, that I was losing my second'

Meghan Markle<sup>8</sup>

professional exams, for others it is the promotion that provides financial security or time in job to allow them maternity leave. As such, choosing to start a family is a planned and prepared-for process – many will stop drinking alcohol and caffeine, up their exercise, start antenatal vitamins. Consequently, conception feels like a personal success and miscarriage as a failure. We have become so used to being in control of our day-to-day lives, from paracetamol for headaches to vaccines for COVID-19, that trying to conceive can be the first time many women come face-to-face with powerlessness. When I miscarried, I was processing not just grief but also shame and guilt. The sense that I had let my husband down was huge. It didn't matter how often he told me it was not my fault, I had no one else and nothing else to blame. And yet, a pregnancy is begotten of God not made by me and my lifestyle. A failed pregnancy is a consequence of the fall, not my personal failure.<sup>1</sup>

*His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus. (John 9:2-3a)*

Miscarriage, infertility, and subfertility are highly emotive issues that are rarely spoken about in Christian circles, even at women's conferences. As Christian healthcare workers, we might have helped people through this 'why me' professionally. But it is highly likely that many young couples we know from our churches and personal life will be also asking this 'why'. This may be the first time they need to grapple with the reality that they are not in control of their lives. Walking alongside young couples means speaking to the big questions dominating their day-to-day lives, which includes miscarriage and subfertility as well as the transition to parenthood. For us and our female colleagues, as well as other working women, the transition from multitasking, driven, successful career woman to being sleep deprived and struggling to get dressed in the morning can be traumatic. As many more women strive to balance work and motherhood the historic picture of women as homemakers may seem outdated and irrelevant and isn't always the model of biblical womanhood today. Managing the challenges of being a working mother is an area in which most of today's Christian women walk.

How can we, as Christian health professionals, support families struggling with miscarriage and subfertility? Firstly, we need to be a part of the national conversation. As women in positions of power speak of their personal experiences, we need to use the opportunity to speak of it to our friends and to our families. Speaking about my miscarriage with friends and colleagues has created amazing opportunities to pray for them and discuss God's comfort. It has also revealed pastorally insensitive comments from 'at least you know you can conceive' to 'at least it was an early miscarriage.' Even with these comments there is an opportunity to explore the value of life from conception. We see our culture's incongruence between recognising the pain of miscarriage and advocating for abortion for any reason. Meghan Markle was *losing her second child* – not just some cells or a foetus. Miscarriage is a time when many instinctively sense the value of the life they are carrying.

Secondly, talk about it from the front. Church leaders need to break the taboo of talking about fertility and miscarriage. Not just in their women's groups but also with the whole congregation. This can be within a sermon: there are many passages that explore God's love for the child in the womb and many women in the Bible struggling with barrenness, some of which will have been miscarriage related. Or having an evening for those who have experienced miscarriage or infertility to come together,

## 'At the beginning of the year, I had a miscarriage which left me heartbroken.'

Carrie Johnson<sup>9</sup>

lament and pray. Or it can simply be including it in the prayers as we pray for other members of our congregation who are unwell or dying.

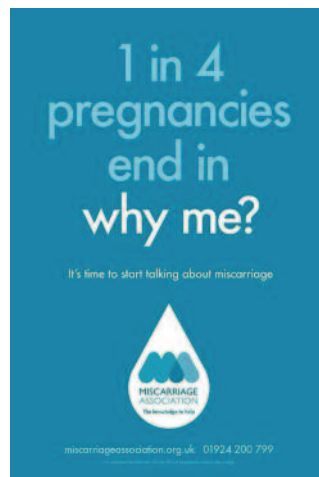
Thirdly it is looking at the whole culture within our churches. Have we created a culture whereby we over-emphasise our own power to succeed? Do we see the world and sin as something we can overcome rather than something Christ has overcome? Do we elevate the family to such an extent that those struggling to have children feel that they are incomplete? Have we preached a God that is overly masculine and so in the midst of miscarriage and infertility 'He' feels unrelatable to our current experience?

This final point I felt particularly keenly.

I converted to Protestantism as a teenager but was brought up Roman Catholic. At points in my journey, I have envied the Catholic's belief in the power of prayer to the Saints. Mary, Mother of Jesus, felt much more relatable than God the Father or Christ the Son (who never tried to have children). I sought the more maternal passages about God. In Isaiah God describes himself like a woman in childbirth crying out<sup>2</sup> and as a mother comforting her child.<sup>3</sup> In Hosea 13:8 God is *'like a bear robbed of her cubs, [who] will attack them and rip them open'*. This raw pain and grief at the loss of children is particularly powerful. Both the Father and Jesus talk of spreading their wings to provide refuge.<sup>4</sup> Whilst there are excellent models of godly women in the Bible that can inspire and encourage, it is important that God as Father and Son is preached in such a way that he speaks to feminine challenges and struggles.

Miscarriage, subfertility, and infertility are consequences of the fall. It is there in Genesis 3:16 *'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe...'* referring to more than the pain of labour itself. Epidurals have not conquered the fall! It is the whole process from wishing to conceive, to conception, to birth, to raising children. In answer to this brokenness Christ lives, dies, and rises again. He is born of a woman, who experiences the full pain of childbearing: from a socially difficult pregnancy, to less-than-ideal third trimester travel, through to the grief of seeing her son crucified. We can help those asking 'why?' to accept that their personal 'why' may never be answered and yet still, like Mary, say, *'my soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour'*. (Luke 1:46-47)

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one  
in  
four



PREGNANCIES  
WILL END IN  
A **MISCARRIAGE**<sup>5</sup>

one  
in  
100




PREGNANCIES  
ARE **ECTOPIC**<sup>6</sup>

one  
in  
seven



COUPLES  
STRUGGLE WITH  
**FERTILITY**<sup>7</sup>

one  
in  
ten



WOMEN  
WILL BE FORMALLY  
DIAGNOSED WITH  
**POST-NATAL  
DEPRESSION** AND MANY  
MORE THE 'BABY BLUES'<sup>7</sup>

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