

BEGINNING OF LIFE

abortion, healing & rescue

Catherine Morris shares her experience and considers the position of women today



Dr Catherine Morris graduated in the UK, and is now a paediatrician in India

I found out I was pregnant in my third year of medical school, during my first clinical attachment in 1999. Both my view of sex and my self-esteem had been smashed following an assault at 18 years old, and I had spent the first few years of university partaking in risk-taking behaviour as a skewed way of trying to numb the pain and make myself feel 'better'. Then it all came crashing down. I remember sitting in A&E as a student doctor on my placement not knowing at all what to do.

I was not from a religious family but had some great housemates who were Jesus followers at the time. I was thankfully able to tell my mum and sister. To all three of us, the only option as a single third year med student was abortion. No one had had a child outside of marriage across all my cousins and it just wasn't on the radar of our family. My dad didn't speak to me for months.

I knew I was pregnant for about three weeks before having the abortion. I told the guy and he was supportive of my decision. I spent every night as I went to sleep dreaming of the baby and then would sob that I knew I couldn't do it. Mum took me to the clinic in another city. I was in and out of British Pregnancy Advisory Service in a few hours after the briefest of counselling sessions. For about 24 hours I was so relieved and ate for the first time in ages. After that the guilt and loss hit me like a bus. I returned to university and went straight into doing obstetric and paediatric placements. It was harrowing and I went home and cried, clutching my empty tummy every night and starting to have suicidal thoughts. Somehow, I managed to get through that year and at Easter my housemates invited me on a weekend away with their church. Over that weekend I met Jesus. The main thing I remember is a feeling of liquid peace settling on me and just a sense of knowing I was deeply loved.

The journey after that was rocky. I had to extricate myself practically from a risk-taking

lifestyle and I continued to slip up. My housemates were amazing. They said at the time they would support me with whatever choice I made, even though it wouldn't be the choice they'd have made. Some people, mainly men at the church, weren't so good. When people found out my background a number of men said they would never marry someone like me, and that I would never be allowed to lead anything after what I'd done. The difference between my new-found faith in Jesus and the male voices around me were so incongruous! After finding it difficult to change my lifestyle I applied for some Christian counselling. In the run up to it, I cried and prayed with the curate's wife, which was the start of my healing. I went to one counselling session after that and spilled out my story. At the end a God-moment happened and the counsellor said one sentence, 'you say yes to risky sex because when you tried to say no the first time you were assaulted, so it's easier to go along with it and say yes'. That day I was freed from so much.

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The last 20 years have been a journey of healing. A life event like an abortion changes you. I am now a paediatrician which I could never have previously imagined! I've lived in India since 2007. My best friend and I set up a charity, *Love the One*, which helps thousands of children every year with health, education and childcare. I've just adopted the most beautiful little boy who is severely disabled, but teaches me every day what it is to love and be human.

My stomach lurched when there were rumblings about overturning *Roe v Wade* (a 1973 judgment of the Supreme Court in the USA which effectively legalised abortion across all 50 states). What happens there tends to have repercussions on the

rest of us, especially in developing countries, which are more reliant on international aid (and which often follows US rules, even if the law is different in the receiving country). I prayed and felt compelled to speak. This is a summary of what I wrote on social media in the lead up to *Roe v Wade* being overturned:

'Do you think abortion should stop? If you do, then let's imagine a world where all men respect women, and no woman is ever raped or coerced into sex in or outside marriage across every culture and country. Where no child is ever sexually abused and any woman who has an unplanned pregnancy has the full support of all her relatives, the whole community and government to the point where the government, charities and her family will fully support her to bring up the child in all ways, and she will not be judged because of it.

Where all children in all countries and cultures, boys and girls, are brought up in a loving and stable family, are always protected from harm, are taught emotional intelligence, safe sex, loving relationships and therefore will only ever make choices which are good.

Where no woman ever has a complex pregnancy or a medical condition where her life is at risk if she doesn't end the pregnancy, and no pregnancy is a multiple (or other complex) pregnancy where ending the life of one fetus will save others. Where patriarchy does not exist at all in any country and every female fetus across the world is loved and wanted before it's born. Where all governments have female representation such that the rights of women are equal to the rights of men. Where every woman and man on the planet has full access to contraception of all types that suits them.

At the moment this world does not exist. If it did then abortion would rarely be needed, if at all. Until most of the above is eliminated, there should be access to safe and legal abortion. The way to reduce the abortion rate is to work

towards this world in all ways. Before Mary became pregnant with Jesus, the Angel Gabriel gave her a choice whether to go through with it and she accepted.¹ In the same way, I believe that girls and women who find themselves in desperate situations should be able to choose whether they continue a pregnancy or not.'

I've spent the last 15 years tackling many of the points above in some small way and have counselled a number of pregnant women. As a charity, we have helped women practically so they can birth and keep their babies. Thankfully so far they have all opted to keep their babies, but if they'd chosen the option of abortion, we would have also walked with them through the process.

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I shared another post from a more prominent female Christian after *Roe v Wade* was overturned, who'd also had an abortion and she talked about her experience. She had more liberal views than me on when life begins, but I shared it more from the perspective of a Christian woman in leadership who had had an abortion when she was a lot younger, which is also my situation. Since then, I've been told publicly, mainly by men and US Christians, that they are 'extremely disappointed in my views' and we've lost funding for the charity due to my personal opinion. Privately I had messages from many Christian women thanking me for sharing, a number of whom are church leaders and some who have lived with having had an abortion.

Why do I share this? So many points come out from my personal experience and where I've landed with whether safe abortion should be available. I live in a culture where over half the population is sexually abused in some way as a child² and where nearly half the country still lives in poverty.

It is a patriarchal culture which means many women have virtually no agency over their bodies, who they marry and have to have sex with, contraception, and how many kids they have. If you take the right to safe abortion away too, more women will be plunged further into the darkness.

Is it right? Every time an unborn life ends, it is a tragic event, but life is messy, very messy and is the decision so easy and black and white? I am a white, middle-class doctor from one of the richest nations on the planet. I have so much privilege and I'm totally aware of that. I had the choice. Was it the right choice? It seemed so at the time when I made it. Would I do the same if I was a third-year medical student with my story in 2022? I can't say as society has changed so much and is more accepting in many ways. Whatever value you place on human life at this early stage, the ability for a woman to choose whether she has a baby or not is often central to her health, her well-being, and occasionally, her very life.

My life was a mess and thanks be to God that he rescued me. I have never felt any sense of judgment from Jesus himself, but I've faced and still face a whole lot from Christians. Jesus is my first love and my life. He saved and helped me. Surely, that's the role of each of us? To help those around us in all ways? The abortion rate is only likely to decrease when we better support those around us. If we love our neighbour, wherever they are, as we would want to be loved and not judged; if we aim to create, as Martin Luther King called it, the '*Beloved Community*' where everyone works for the common good, or alternatively '*Heaven on Earth*' which we pray in the Lord's Prayer every time we say it, then the abortion rate will vastly decrease.

Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly³ and don't judge, please don't judge; Jesus commands us not to in Matthew 7:1. Let's then see what happens in society as a whole. I think we'll all be absolutely amazed. ■



final thought

We are very grateful to Catherine for sharing her story in such an open and vulnerable way. We feel immense compassion for all that she went through and the life circumstances that led to her belief at the time that she had no other choice.

We share Catherine's vision of a society where fetuses, children, girls and women are treated with the dignity God intended. And we believe that such societal change is fundamental to reducing the demand for abortion, both in the UK and overseas.

CMF continues to work to prevent the liberalisation of abortion law in the UK, and to lower time limits for abortion in all cases except where the life of the mother is at stake. We are also working with others to improve support for women facing unexpected pregnancies, aiming to ensure that they never feel that abortion is their only choice. We long for and work towards the day when abortion is both unnecessary and unthinkable. ■

REFERENCES

1. For some background to this view, see Prior KS. Let it Be: Mary's Radical Declaration of Consent. *The Atlantic*. 24 December 2012. bit.ly/3Be7xDJ
2. Kacker L et al. Study on Child Abuse: India. 2007. Ministry of Women and Child Development. Government of India. 2007. bit.ly/3F9QV1
3. Micah 6:8