

Precious stones: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

by [Jenny Williams](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

On a recent visit to Washington, D.C., I saw the Hope diamond at the National Museum of Natural History. It's odd to think that a large piece of carbon, refined by millions of years of compression and cut by human hands, could draw such crowds. Yet people are continually huddled around the display case, which is wired with numerous sensors for security.

The diamond's beauty is obvious—the gem is striking in color and size. At approximately 45 carats, it is less than half the size that it is thought to have been centuries ago. As it changed hands throughout the ages, it was probably cut at least twice, once in hopes of disguising its origin to protect the thief who stole it during the French Revolution. According to legend, the diamond has brought a curse upon its owners and their families. Stories circulate about death and horrible tragedy befalling the possessors of this stone, which makes it seem “precious” only in the way that the One Ring seemed precious to Gollum.

The museum's gem collection houses many other types of rocks and stones as well. One that caught my eye was the geode. Unlike a diamond, a geode is a plain, gray rock on the outside, yet when it's broken, it reveals an inside filled with sparkling crystallized minerals. As a child, I was fascinated by such rocks. How could something that looks so plain house something so beautiful?

The psalmist draws heavily upon geological and petrological imagery, then reminds us that God is our fortress of rock, a sanctuary in which we find refuge. This rock of ages, everlasting to everlasting and bigger than any boulder we could envision, was “cleft” for us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Gem owners have their precious stones cut to make them more beautiful to the beholder. Jesus' captors had him cut, pierced, flogged and nailed so that the onlookers at Calvary might be taught a lesson when they gazed on him. This is where God triumphed, however, because in Jesus' brokenness his worth is revealed. Stephen embodied this mystery of brokenness too: he gave himself to be broken so that the brilliance of God might be made known.

The self-giving act makes Jesus precious. He is not put in a heavily guarded display case; access to him is not restricted. Rather he freely gives himself away to all who receive him—an act we experience tangibly as we receive the broken bread.

This self-giving is also what makes him rejected. People are skeptical of anything that is free. When “free” offers invade our mailboxes and inboxes, we dump them in the trash can or delete them from our computer screens. We assume that something that is free must either be worthless or have strings attached to it. It’s the things that are roped off and made available only during visiting hours that are worthy or valuable to us. But not this gift of God’s son. Like a geode’s crystals, Jesus’ beauty and worth are invisible to those who are looking for the evident and the obvious. In *Letters from the Desert*, Carlo Carretto helps us understand how Jesus could be missed by a world that doesn’t know what or whom to look for:

Astonishing! The Son of God, who—more than anyone else—was free to choose what he would, chose not only a mother and a people, but also a social position. And he wanted to be a wage earner.

That Jesus had *voluntarily* lost himself in an obscure Middle Eastern village; annihilated himself in the daily monotony of 30 years’ rough, miserable work; separated himself from the society that “counts”; and died in total anonymity.

God chose to become one who would be unnoticed by some and rejected by others.

This costly stone gives us life. This living stone—chosen, precious and rejected—becomes a firm foundation for the rest of us blockheads who make up the church. PHEME PERKINS, professor of New Testament at Boston College, reminds us that many Christians see local churches as human institutions and forget that it is God who builds God’s church. How else could such a wide variety of people from all walks of life, social positions and family structures become a dwelling for the Holy Spirit? Paul tells us:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a

holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually in a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:19-22)

If the flesh of Jesus could break down the dividing wall between both Jews and gentiles and make them into one, then surely the resurrected Christ can build farmers and stay-at-home parents and mechanics and doctors into a dwelling place for God. How odd that the rock of ages, in whom we seek sanctuary, fashions *us* into a living sanctuary for the rest of the world.

What makes the gift of the church astonishing is that none of us, save Jesus, is necessarily striking in our singularity. And even Jesus does not stand alone. He offers himself to be the building material that anchors the rest of us in place. Alone, none of us is beautiful or impressive. Together, growing into a place where God lives, we are precious in his sight.