

28<sup>th</sup> August 2023

## Crowd

**“A crowd is not the sum of the individuals who compose it.  
Rather it is a species of animal, without language or real consciousness,  
born when they gather, dying when they depart.”**

Gene Wolfe, *The Shadow of the Torturer*

There's an oft-quoted phrase in football commentary that "The crowd is the twelfth man" – that's in *male* matches, of course, and it's appropriately adjusted for the woman's game. With eleven players on the pitch, the support of the crowd can communicate itself to the team, such that energy levels are raised and the will-to-win improved. It's no different in American football, when a home crowd screaming "Defence! Defence!" can drown out the play-calls of the offensive team. And any performer will tell you that the support and applause of a crowd can be really important in the level of performance that's reached, or the satisfaction of a job well done.

Gene Wolfe is right. There are no individuals in a crowd. The crowd emerges when people are together and dies when they depart. If you've been the recipient of such a supportive crowd, or if you've been part of that crowd offering support, you'll know just what I mean.

For myself, I've more often been part of a crowd giving support than being the one receiving it. As a jobbing preacher over several decades, I've often enough been *faced* with a crowd (though whether a small congregation can really be called a crowd, I'll leave you to ponder), but it's usually a silent crowd. I may be able to *feel* the support and a positive response to what's being offered, but it's largely tacit. As a preacher, I've only once been the recipient of a demonstrative response from a crowd. It happened in a country church, on the last Sunday of a stint of locum work. When I'd finished my sermon, I got a round of applause, the collective support of an appreciative group of people. It was wonderful! I don't know whether it was pre-planned or spontaneous, but I loved it.

Being on the pitch, or on the stage, or in the pulpit, can be a lonely business, especially with a silent crowd. So how can the crowd offer its support? Might a round of applause, pre-arranged or spontaneous, be a start? For the performing preacher, what a difference that might make.

### **A prayer for today**

*“He left the stage with the applause ringing in his dreams.”*

*I hope I'm worth more than that for you, Lord. Amen*