I want to talk this morning about the call of God – the call of God to Samuel and to Philip and Nathaniel, the call of God to Christian Unity, and the call of God to you and me. And in doing so I want to invite us to hear that call as a voice that breaks the silence.

Last Thursday we went to see The Imitation Game – if you’ve not seen it, I would really recommend it. It is a magnificent film. In places it is unbearably moving. Benedict Cumberbatch is outstanding. I hope he gets the Oscar he has been nominated for. We see him as the brilliant Alan Turing fighting against the odds to crack the German codes. If he can build the Enigma machine it will help to bring the Second World War to a close. And if that can happen, it will end the Nazi system that knew all the answers, brooked no opposition and silenced all voices of dissent. Turing does build the machine, the enemy codes are cracked, the war is shortened by as much as two years, and the silence imposed by Nazi tyranny is broken.

The call of Samuel is a call to break the silence of religious wrongdoing. Of course the actual call is one of the loveliest and most memorable stories of the Old Testament. Samuel is the beloved and unexpected child of his mother Hannah, dedicated to the Lord and serving in the Temple. We are very taken by the repeated call from this strange voice which Samuel can’t make out until it is decoded by his mentor, the priest of the Lord, the old man Eli. And Samuel is repeatedly called by name. It is personal and specific and addressed to him. But what makes it so poignant is that Samuel is being summoned to the role of a Prophet. He’s been called to denounce and to warn - the primary function of the Prophet then - and he is to warn the old man Eli that his priestly sons are dis-honouring the name of the Lord. They have been stealing from the sacrifices of the faithful and they are sleeping with the women in the Temple, and Samuel is being called to speak the word of God to them, to warn Eli that his priestly line will die out because his sons’ days are numbered. Samuel is being called to break the silence of religious wrongdoing.

Every weekday morning at 8.30 here in the Cathedral, we gather to say Morning Prayer. This is a great way to start the day. This week we have been listening to the prophet Amos and flinching at his fierce denunciations. We see Amos laying into the King’s Chapel and the way of the Royal Court. He is having a go at the establishment. (A little bit like our archbishops this week criticising the economic system for leaving the poor behind). Amos is called to break the silence of political wrongdoing. And what Amos is saying to the King and his circle of advisers is this: ‘Look! You’ve gone very wrong, you don’t care for the people, your sense of justice and fairness is hopeless. God’s judgment is on you and you need to change your ways.’ Unsurprisingly this is not a popular message, it is not a way to win friends and influence people, particularly the establishment of the day! And so predictably the priest of the King’s Chapel tells Amos to go away. ‘Push off! Go South. You can’t talk that way round here because here disapproving words are not allowed. Hold your tongue, keep silent.’ The urge to silence dissent - the desire to shut people up - is always strong. (The bombing of Charlie Hebdo’s offices in Paris is a particularly extreme form of this). And the voice of God - the voice from elsewhere - must always be raised against it.

So whether it is the call of God to Samuel to be a prophet of religious integrity or whether it is the call of God through Amos to speak truth to power in the cause of political and economic justice, the divine call will be a voice of judgment that breaks the silence so as to cause the world to function differently.

And now to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The world of the Christian churches has changed massively in our lifetime. Local relationships and dialogues at a national level change the picture. We have come to see that the task of Christian Unity is not primarily institutional, it’s not primarily about amalgamations and mergers of identity, but
rather rests on the importance of relationships and respecting different points of view. Of course there will always be those who say – ‘if we give an inch, they’ll take a mile. So let’s retain our closed and exclusive system’. I’m thinking for example of those who put the fun into fundamentalism! Here silence is the silence of fear, including the fear of disorder. ‘We cannot move because the world might collapse’. And yet God longs for the unity of all his people, he has set his heart upon us, and his yearning is for our growth in relationship and in our understanding of others. So he wants us to make new arrangements and to create new ways of working and being together, and to understand that every new arrangement is only temporary until the fresh wave of the Holy Spirit of God calls it into question and moves us on in ways. And when we look at this, we are witnessing the stirrings of the divine call not only in judgment but also in hope. Which brings me to my third and final point - the call of Philip and Nathaniel.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of the kingdom – and the call of Philip and Nathaniel is a call to participate in it. Here is the voice of God, uttered through Jesus, breaking the silence of our everyday lives. Jesus is coming into human lives in radically new ways, offering hope and possibility and the promise of heaven. Here is Jesus calling ordinary people to follow him into a new way of life and living. Here is Jesus summoning people to follow the way of God, which is a life of freedom and possibility and growth. And you and I this morning are again listening to this call, this voice from beyond or within, breaking into our everyday silence, lifting our hearts, challenging our conformity and urging us to step out in renewed faith and trust. The call is to me and to you by name, personally, to join in the work of Jesus Christ which is the work of the kingdom of heaven. Shall we do it? Shall we say – ‘Speak Lord for your servant is listening?’

To summarise then: the call of God is a voice that breaks into the religious life, seeking integrity in place of wrong doing, unity in place of division, relationship in place of formalism. The call of God is a voice breaking into the silence of our political life, cleansing it in the pursuit of justice. And the voice breaking into the silence of our everyday lives asks us, as we shall sing shortly:

‘Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?

AMEN