



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES  
LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

*Office of the General Secretary*

Sermon by:

**Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko**

General Secretary, The Lutheran World Federation

On the occasion of

**The Opening of 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the 11<sup>th</sup> General Synod  
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***Luke 10:38-42***

**Jesus Visits Martha and Mary**

*'Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'*

Jesus is a guest of honour in the home of two sisters Martha and Mary. From this Lukan text we discover that while these two sisters are two distinct individuals, they nevertheless represent two interconnected qualities. Luke presents us with a Martha who Jesus describes as "*worried and distracted by many things*". What are these many things that worry and distract Martha? Was she engaged or involved in so many family and community issues? Could she be the local community administrator with a demanding schedule? Could she be one of the exceptional women leaders in the Synagogue? Whatever it was, it seems that she was well known for extensive involvement in activities that went beyond just domestic duties. She has earned herself a reputation of a good hostess.

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries this particular story of biblical Martha served as a model and a source of inspiration for women's groups and for the diaconal ministry of the church. The Martha movements were established in some European countries and in North America, but in later years in other countries as well. These movements sought to improve the society's concept of homemakers; advocating for giving more status and recognition to women who choose to be homemakers and to those who had no option. Martha movement contributed in significant ways to the advancement of economic and cultural lives of women. In [some Nordic countries](#) such as Finland it made a qualitative difference in the formation of social [welfare policies](#) giving special rights to women. It laid a strong tradition for women's participation in public life that has continued to this day.

On the other hand her sister Mary is presented by Luke as someone *"who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying"*. According to the academic practice of the time, students or disciples undertook their studies sitting at feet of their Teachers (Rabbi). Scholars of biblical studies inform us that the Torah was taught at the Rabbinical schools only to male and not female students. The encounter between Mary and Jesus though taking place within a home and not at a Rabbinical school frames the encounter with a language of Rabbi-disciple relationship. **One wonders why Luke framed this encounter in the way he did.** The truth of the matter is that we do not really know why. It could be that there was a controversy at the time of Jesus about women enrolling in Rabbinical schools. **If one is open to that trend of thought for a moment, then the reasoning behind the Lukan account was intended to portray Jesus as departing from the traditional norm. Such a departure would be tended to renew bonds of relationship within the society – men and women.** Thus laying the foundation for what St Paul was to declare in later years, that "in Christ there is no Jew, nor Gentile ....no male or female".

Yes whatever the reasons are for Luke to frame it in the way he did the story is about Mary's call to discipleship. In response to that call Mary demonstrated devoted discipleship. Similarly in the Gospel of John chapters 11 and 12 the same Martha-Mary story is **substantially** told. In chapter 11:25-27 Jesus spoke to Martha about resurrecting her brother Lazarus, he said to her "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even though he dies, Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord." She answered. "I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into this world." John the Gospel writer demonstrates that Martha recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. The gift of insight as to who Jesus was, is **bestowed indiscriminately** to Martha in as much as it **was bestowed** to Peter the senior of the disciples of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew 16:13-19 when Jesus asked his disciples as to what do people say Jesus was, Peter the most senior of the disciples declares, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Martha and Peter are presented by the Gospel writers as those to whom God revealed the secrets and the mystery of Jesus's identity. Therefore, Martha, Mary, Peter and the rest of the believers share equally in professing the apostolic faith.

Martha and Mary represent two very important aspects of discipleship, those of: ***listening and doing; faith and works.*** These belong together. They are interconnected.

My dear sisters and brothers **in Synod!** We live in a noisy world; full of competitive offers and occasions. Where there is a lot of talking, promise making; advertising one thing after another; countless email messages; in other words: we hear so much and we see so much to the extent that we have lost the **capacity and the patience** to listen; the ability to discern the Divine voice in the midst of all this confusion is very difficult. Many things are done today without the necessary spiritual discernment. Diaconal work represented in the person of Martha, is the translation of our faith in God into actions of love; of caring for one another and for God's creation. To be a loving and a caring community is possible if we take the time to listen to what God wants to do. No pilot can fly a plane from Frankfurt to Johannesburg without a GPS or guidance from the control tower.

In the Lutheran and Protestant tradition the Synod of the church is vested with authority. The decisions of the Synod **are in most cases binding. For the Synod to lead it can not do so without God' s guidance; without discerning what Christ wills for His church.** The story of the **listening Mary** is instructive for this constituting Synod. **During that time ahead you will be faced with many challenging issues. Some of these will be about the unity of the church in its many expressions;** ecumenical relations, **sustainable ecumenical structures,** the social issues emerging in your own changing European landscape. The crises facing young people and older generation whose future is threatened by the recent economic and financial realities.

Yes, my dear sisters and brothers, you are a Synod and not a Parliament. There is a qualitative difference between being a Synod and being the Bundestag in Berlin or any other parliament in the world. You are **not** elected on party lines and therefore there are no opposition and ruling parties. There may be different opinions, arguments and differentiated ways of seeing things but there are no synod members that are designated as **opposition**. A Synod meeting is a moment of discernment; when together with Mary we gather at the feet of Jesus Christ to listen and discern His will so that with Martha, we may engage in actions and works of love; these actions are the fruits of our faith.

Yes, the Synod is not a Parliament, [a place where we compete and sometimes “auction” our views for the sake of political correctness. But rather the Synod is a moment of assuming a posture of humility.](#) We are not in Synod to manage **our** church(es) but the Church of Jesus Christ. Our wisdom and intellectual capacities are not the foundation of the Church. God's Word is the Foundation. Yes, God's Word is the source of our faith and the foundation of our actions and works of love.

In this regard we are reminded of Martin Luther's "Sermon on Good Works" in which there is an idea which fascinates me. While God could do everything independently yet God does not choose to act alone. God wants us to participate and gives us the honour of doing so. What would it imply for our actions if we were to say humbly, "God, if you want this to be done and if I am to participate in doing it, then I am prepared to do so." What does God want us to do? What does God want me to do? When we Christians act — and we should act — the question always arises: what is it that God wants me to do? In order to find the answer, we need to listen to God. [The Synod is a place and a time to mature a culture of listening for the sake of discerning the will of God.](#)

The other insight which we gain from reading Luther is that faith is the "master of works"; it is faith which should govern and determine what we do. Faith should be the head of our actions as Christ is the head of the church. That is the source of the inner driving force, the enthusiasm and also of calmness, effortlessness, humaneness, spontaneity and selflessness. A lot of action is strained, tense, grim, self-righteous, one-sided, defensive, done with a superior attitude and with contempt for others. The Samaritan came along by chance, acted spontaneously and continued on his journey. The faith which results from listening is the master of our works.

Yes, listening as the first lesson of this text is applicable to the most recent agreement between Lutherans, Roman Catholics and [now with Methodists](#). The signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is a result of listening to God's Word and to one another. In that prayerful listening we discovered one another; we discovered that we spoke about the same things in differentiated ways. From that experience we learnt that **listening** is a gift; a gift that the Church as the body of Christ must pray for ceaselessly. It is a gift that the nations of this world need. We cannot co-exist peacefully unless and until we learn and recognize the need to listen to one another.

I pray that God may guide and strengthen you in your responsibility as members of the Synod, remembering that the decisions that you will make are not just for the Christian community within the [Federal Republic of Germany](#). They are decisions made by you here for the spiritual well being of the Church of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Your Synod is a synod within and for the Church Universal. [You are not meeting in isolation but a part of the body of Christ.](#)

May you continue to listen to God's Word so that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven!

Amen