Let us begin with a prayer.

‘Yes, you will go out with joy and be led away in safety.
Mountains and hills will break into joyful cries before you
and all the trees of the country side clap their hands.
Cypress will grow instead of thorns, myrtle instead of nettles.
And this will be fame for Yahweh, an eternal moment never to be effaced.’ (Is 55: 12-13)

I have been asked to talk to you about the Referendum as a moment of salvation in the lives of the people of Bougainville. We will look at a spirituality or theology of salvation rather than at the mechanics and legalities of the Referendum, which you know better than I. Through a theology we can develop a religious language that better expresses what we want to say in the context of our Faith.

We need first to think about what it means to be saved. What is salvation? I will give a long definition from the Dictionary of Biblical Theology (p. 559).

‘To be saved is to be taken out of a dangerous situation in which one risked perishing. According to the nature of the danger, the act of saving manifests itself in protection, liberation, ransom, cure and health, victory, life, peace... Using such a human experience as a starting point, and borrowing the very terms in which it was expressed, revelation has explained one of the most essential aspects of God’s action on earth: God saves men, Christ is our Saviour (Lk 2: 11), the gospel brings salvation to every believer (Rom 1: 16).’

The next question to ask is, what are we to be saved from? It is roughly one hundred and twenty-five years since Europeans established an active presence on the islands of Bougainville. That has affected at least five generations of people, during a time in which there has been rapid change in the lives of Bougainvilleans. Many things have been good, some have been bad and some have been chaotic. The people of Bougainville experienced World War I, when the German colonial administration was replaced by the Australian colonial administration. There were, however, no real battles in Bougainville. World War II, on the other hand, was much more damaging. The Japanese invaded north and east Bougainville, and the Americans, Australians and Fijians set up bases on the west coast around Torokina. Battles ensued and villages were bombed. When independence came in 1975, Bougainvilleans asked for their own independence but were incorporated into PNG. The Referendum is intimately linked to the Crisis between 1988 and 1998, a momentous and tragic event in Bougainvillean history, which has left hatred and conflict between Bougainvilleans in villages, between villages and between individual persons. Today reconciliation is still needed.

During all this time missionaries were present, and today Bougainvilleans are blessed with a deep Faith in God. While the various administrations and the missionaries intended to do good and often did do good, they were also sometimes neglectful and clumsy, and
Bougainvilleans often had little say about their own future. I apologise for the mistakes and errors of the Australian administration, especially those that led to the Crisis.

The Referendum is, then, a moment of salvation: an opportunity for self-determination and an opportunity for reconciliation. It is the third pillar of the Peace Agreement. It will not be the end point, although it will be a very important moment in a long story. It could go badly for you, but you are all working hard to make it go well. Whatever the outcome, what will be most important will be that Bougainvilleans be more united and that they be empowered to work together for their common future.

I want to introduce you to three theologies of salvation and then to focus on one. The first is the theology of the Book of Exodus. It tells of how Moses led the Israelites out of slavery into the desert, where they wandered for forty years before settling in Canaan. During that time, God gave Moses the ten commandments and other laws governing Israelite life, and the people were certain that God was with them as they journeyed, even if sometimes they doubted or weakened. Salvation for them meant that God was with them as they travelled and lived their story, and this could be applied to the last 125 years of life in Bougainville.

The second theology is that of the Second Isaiah (chapters 40 – 55). Second Isaiah lived 150 years after the first Isaiah, Isaiah of Jerusalem, who had warned the people that if they did not turn from sin, live well and ensure justice for all, God would punish them. Second Isaiah was writing his poems and songs in Babylon (modern Iraq) to which the people had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar after he destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. He wrote at the time when Cyrus, the King of Persia (Iran), defeated Babylon and allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. His message is one of salvation and was used by the early Church when it looked for language in which to describe Jesus’s life and message. We will return to it in a moment.

The third theology is that of the Gospels and of Jesus Christ. For us, the Paschal Mystery is the most important theology of salvation and we celebrate it every time we offer the mass and so commemorate Jesus’s death and resurrection. It is Christ’s ultimate sacrifice that offers us entry to the Kingdom of God. This should be with us always.

Let me return to Second Isaiah, because his theology is, I believe, the most helpful for our reflection on the Referendum as a moment of salvation. There are four main themes in Second Isaiah. The first is the need of salvation. The people were enslaved and beaten down. They were resigned to their misery and despair. Isaiah had to wake them up and to inspire them to look to God for salvation and hope. The second is the source of salvation, which is God, who is creator of heaven and earth, who spread out the stars and held the earth in his hand. If God can do all of this, he will surely look after the people he has made, not only the Israelites, but all nations. The third is mission. It is God’s mission to care for his people, but this mission is shared with Isaiah and with the Israelites themselves once they wake up and put their trust in God as they rebuild their city and reconstruct their country. We share in that mission today, both in making God known to people and in working for the restoration of life in Bougainville. The fourth is joy in the fulfillment of salvation. Isaiah was wildly excited by the salvation offered to the Israelites as they were able to return to Jerusalem and recover their life as a people and the ability to choose their own future. He also realised
that salvation was more than just a return to the earthly city of Jerusalem; it pointed towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

We can make this theology part of our own language by reading the poems and hymns in Second Isaiah. I will choose a few passages now from chapters 40 and 55. These are on a sheet that I will give you and that can be photocopied. I will also give you a copy of the whole of the text of chapters 40 – 55, which can also be photocopied.

As you listen or read, absorb the language. The poet is giving us images and words with which we can describe the moment of salvation that we are in. The Referendum is a moment of salvation, and your wonderful work is to make people conscious, aware and awake, so that they, too, may share in the hope of being able to determine their own future and in a future that is very good. You want it to be a future in which people are reconciled and in which Bougainville is fully rebuilt as a place where people can live good lives.

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‘Console my people, console them,’ says your God.
‘Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and cry to her, that her period of service is ended that her guilt has been atoned for, that, from the hand of Yahweh, she has received double punishment for all her sins.’ (Is 40: 1-2)

A voice cries, ‘Prepare in the desert a way for Yahweh.
Make a straight highway for our God across the wastelands.
Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be levelled, every cliff become a plateau, every escarpment a plain;
then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed and all humanity will see it together, for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.’ (Is 40: 3-5)

Who was it measured the water of the sea in the hollow of his hand and calculated the heavens to the nearest inch, gauged the dust of the earth to the nearest bushel, weighed the mountains in scales, the hills in a balance?
To whom can you compare God? What image can you contrive of him? (Is 40: 12, 18)

Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty; though you have no money, come!
Buy and eat; come buy wine and milk without money, free!
Why spend money on what cannot nourish and your wages on what fails to satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy.
Pay attention, come to me; listen, and you will live. (Is 55: 1-3)

Seek out Yahweh while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near.
Let the wicked abandon his way and the evil one his thoughts.
Let him turn back to Yahweh who will take pity on him, to our God, for he is rich in forgiveness;
‘for my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways,’ declares Yahweh.
‘For the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts.’ (Is 55: 6-9)

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