

Boesak stakes his claim to a future in politics

RUNNING WITH HORSES

Allan Boesak
Joho Publishers
REVIEW:
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ALLAN BOESAK'S place in the history of the South African struggle is pretty much guaranteed, despite his imprisonment for fraud in May, 2000.

What is not guaranteed is his place in South Africa's political future, and it is to this question that his new book is implicitly addressed.

It was published when Boesak, having apparently broken free of his long and troubled relationship with the ANC, was serving in a relatively low-key role as a Cope member of the Western Cape Provincial Parliament.

Boesak writes that the idea for the book started from "the fact that much of what I had to say during the struggle for liberation in South Africa remains unrecorded". Indeed, from a total of 18 chapters, seven consist of speeches and sermons delivered between 1979 and 1985.

But it is disingenuous of the author to imply that these are "unrecorded" or fugitive texts.

Several were published in his 1987 collection *If This is Treason, I am Guilty*, and others can fairly easily be tracked down, even on film. Such a criticism probably misses the point. Boesak is not writing history, or even for history; he is writing to re-establish his own political legitimacy.

So the key question is, how are we to read this book, which looks backwards in order, apparently, to look forwards?

In the introduction the author states categorically that it is "not an autobiography" (p 8).

In the most obvious sense, this is correct. We are not treated to a narrative from his childhood in Kakamas through Somerset West to his early adulthood in Bellville and so onwards and upwards until the tragic fall, and, perhaps, some future redemption.

But there are many ways to tell a story, and autobiography too can assume many forms.

The main subject of Boesak's book is clearly Allan Boesak. Its purpose is "autobiographical" because he constructs for his readers a re-constituted public self, using his past achievements to stake out a claim for a present-day political role.

This is a self whose personal story as a religious and political leader; by Boesak's own account, coincides significantly with South Africa's national history at its "most exciting moments" and its "crucial and decisive turning points". It is a self who is a political figure only "accidentally".

It is a self whose story, importantly, is still provisional, unfinished, full of possibility: "I am too young ... so much must still happen" (p 8).

The book is organised in four parts, three relatively short, and a long final section of eight chapters. As the subtitle warns us, it is a collection of reflections, past and present, suffused throughout by Boesak's religious and non-violent world view, on such topics as race, faith and justice (p 258-83) or Christian-Muslim relations (p 284-304).

The first sections of the book reinstate Boesak's claim to have played a key political role in the 1980s, especially in calling for the establishment of the United Democratic Front (UDF), first in the pages of this newspaper on January 7, 1983,

and then in a speech to the Transvaal Indian Congress later the same month. His keynote address at the launch of the UDF in August, 1983, is included in full, with its powerful riffs and variations on the theme "we want all of our rights, we want them here, and we want them now" (p 151-2).

Much of the central part of the book, apart from the speeches, is taken up with musings on the experience of the UDF, with fascinating vignettes such as the brief account of the encounter with Oliver Tambo in Lusaka in 1980, when the ANC leader explained his ethical difficulties over the choice of armed struggle (p 90-91).

Boesak includes his letter of protest to Kader Asmal in March, 2001, after Asmal criticised a large Christians-only rally on Human Rights Day as sectarian (p 246-57).

Boesak wants religion firmly back in the public square in our imperfectly secular republic. In a core polemical chapter he takes other authors to task for what he calls "academic and political dishonesty" (p 353) in not treating the role of religious faith in struggle politics seriously enough. For Boesak, faith and prayer have the power to create change, and any struggle is a spiritual one.

The final section, entitled *Coming Home*, serves two functions. It reasserts Boesak's claims to innocence of defrauding the Foundation for Peace and Justice of donor funds, and to a mantle of spiritual and moral leadership.

To this latter end, the text of Boesak's stirring Ashley Kriel memorial lecture, delivered to a large audience at UWC in July, 2008, is reprinted in full as the closing chapter of the book.

It remains to be seen

whether this event will eventually come to be viewed as a triumphant "coming home" for Boesak or as a false dawn.

Boesak's political reputation derives from two personal qualities. These are his ability to mirror the deeply-held Christian convictions of many people in the Western Cape, often across racial categories, and his skill in arousing his listeners through oratory.

As a speaker, Boesak is eloquent and passionate, using rhetorical flourishes and phrasing, mixing high seriousness and humour. In this respect, the words on these printed pages are like a musical score, falling flat on paper and representing only a part of the whole. By analogy, one suspects that the book cannot finally be understood without some understanding of the man.

Boesak is a sophisticated reader of Biblical texts, so it is no accident that his title, *Running with Horses*, is taken from a proverbial expression that appears in the Book of Jeremiah.

God warned Jeremiah that he would be repeatedly attacked and conspired against for speaking the truth, but would never be vanquished.

In the Biblical narrative, Jeremiah was falsely accused, beaten, imprisoned and threatened with death, but was always rescued from his enemies by divine intervention.

Boesak, like Jeremiah, sees himself as both righteous and innocent of the charges against him, in a parallel that will presumably not be lost on the more alert of his Christian readers, especially in the Western Cape.

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