Ephesians 5:21-33

It used to be true that the values of the Bible overlapped pretty closely with the values of western culture, particularly in the UK –

 and that’s not surprising given that the foundation of our society and our rule of law is heavily Christian.

But it is perhaps more and more true now that actually the values of the Bible and the values of our culture are diverging.

That’s not always the case.

We could turn to parts of the Bible that speak about welcoming the outsider, speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, caring for the vulnerable, feeding the hungry –

 and on the whole, most people in our culture whatever their belief about God would say – that sounds about right, I agree with doing that,

 even if my motives for doing so are different.

But turn to a passage like the one in front of us in Ephesians –

 and for many people it will feel rather different.

After everything that has been achieved particularly in the 20th century in terms of equality for women –

 can we really take these words that we read in Ephesians 5 seriously today?

Wives, submit to your husbands…

The husband is the head of the wife…

What is this?

At face value you might think what we have here smacks of the kind of marriage advice women were given in 1950s magazines – here are some extracts from Housekeeping Monthly in 1955 on how to welcome your husband home from work:

First, have his favourite meal ready

Then, prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you’ll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.

Clear away the clutter. Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives. Gather up schoolbooks, toys, paper, etc. and then run a dust cloth over the tables.

Children are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part. Minimize all noise. At the time of his arrival, eliminate all noise of the washer, dryer or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet. Remember his topics of conversation are more important than yours. Let him lean back in a comfortable chair and put his feet up with a cool drink. A good wife always knows her place.

Now that’s not to knock any couple who happily choose to relate to each other in that way

 but the question is, is that what Ephesians 5 is advocating in this blueprint for marriage that Paul outlines?

The answer if it’s not clear is no – but that reminds us that, whenever we come to the Bible we come with a whole load of cultural baggage and assumptions

and in many cases reactions against experiences or notions we may have from elsewhere.