The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about Lent

苦 Putonghua pronunciation: ku3
Cantonese pronunciation: foo2
Meaning: bitter, sad, sorrow, suffering, tortuous

苦 (radical ++ = 草 cao3, grass) means 苦味 (ku3 wei4 = bitter-taste) or 辛苦 (xin1 ku3 = spicy-hot-bitter = difficult-stressful). Underdog 吃苦 (chi1 ku3 = eat-bitter = leads a hard life), 苦笑 (ku3 xiao4 = bitter-smile/laugh = smile sorely).

Young Werther has 苦惱 (ku3 nao3 = frustrations/sorrows). Wounds/misunderstandings inflict 痛苦 (tong4 ku3 = pain-bitterness/sorrow). War causes 苦難 (ku3 nan4 = grief-calamities). Buddhists say 苦海無邊 (ku3 hai3 wu2 bian1 = suffering-ocean-has-no-edge = life is endless sorrow).

Carrying his cross, Jesus Christ 受苦 (shou4 ku3 = receive-pain/agony = suffered, was harshly treated) on his road to crucifixion. Hence Christians observe Lent by 拜苦路 (bai4 ku3 lu4 = worship-bitter-road = walking the Way of Sorrows, Latin: Via Dolorosa).

by Diana Yue