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

献 (radical 犬 qüan3, dog) implies 献上 (xian4 shang4 = offering-up) 祭品 (ji4 pin3 = sacrificial-objects = sacrifice, e.g. lamb/dog), i.e. 献祭 (xian4 jì4 = offer-sacrifice). 献给 (xian gei3 = offer-to) means respectfully present/offer. Charity concert raises 献金 (xian4 jin1 = offer-gold/money = money donations). After singer 献歌 (xian4 ge1 = offer-song = sang a number), kid 献花 (xian4 hua1 = presented-her-with-a-bouquet).

Lackey follows boss around, 献计 (xian4 jì4 = offers-ideas/suggestions), 献媚 (xian4 mei2 = offers-charms/flattery).

Mathematician 献身 (xian4 shen1 = gives-body/life to) research, makes many 贡献 (gong4 xian4 = tribute-offer = contributions).

In Lent Christians remember Jesus Christ 献出生命 (xian4 chu1 sheng1 ming4 = offering-out-life-fate = giving his own life, i.e. dying) for sinners.

by Diana Yue