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

祈
Putonghua pronunciation: qi2
Cantonese pronunciation: kei4
Meaning: pray, beg, entreat, request, beseech

祈 has radical 神 (shen2, reveal) indicating god-related: 神 (shen2, god/spirit), 祕 (mi4, secret/mystical), 福 (huo4, heaven-sent calamity), 福 (fu2, heaven-sent blessing), 祇 (ta1, pronoun for “god”), 祝 (zhu1, bless/wish we], 祥 (you4, bless). 祈 means pray/entreat. In grammar, 祈使句 (qi2 shi3 jü4 = entreat-command-sentence) means imperative sentence.

Humans 祈求 (qi2 qiu2 = pray-ask/beg for) gods’ protection. Temple-goers 祈福 (qi2 fu2 = pray/beg-for-blessings). In draught, shaman 祈雨 (qi2 yu3 = prays-for-rain). In 天壇 (Tian1 Tan2 = Beijing’s Heavenly/Imperial-Altar), Chinese Emperor annually offered prayers/sacrifices at 祈年殿 (Qi2 Nian2 Dian4 = pray-year-hall = Hall of Prayer for Year of Good Harvest).

In Lent, Christians recite 祈禱文 (qi2 dao3 wen2 = ask-pray-texts = prayers) focusing on Christ’s sufferings and crucifixion.

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