



## **Palestinian Olive Farmers visit Canterbury – Fairtrade team-up with comedian Mark Thomas**

Palestinian olive farmers joined forces with comedian Mark Thomas this week to tell Canterbury people about the importance of Fairtrade. Bassema Basalat and Riziq Abu Nasser produce olives for the world's first Fairtrade olive oil, which is exported to the UK by the specialist firm Zaytoun – the Arabic word for 'olive'. Their visit to Canterbury, with Taysir Arbasi, a Zaytoun manager, was one of the local events in Fairtrade Fortnight.

It coincided with Mark Thomas's show at the Gulbenkian Theatre – 'Extreme Rambling: Walking the Wall' – his wry account of walking the entire length of the separation barrier which Israeli forces have erected on the occupied West Bank. His story tells of the harsh conditions this has created for Palestinian farmers and workers trying to go about their daily lives, and it was natural that he should team up with Bassema and Riziq to tell how Fairtrade provides a lifeline for the farmers.

In the Gulbenkian Café-Bar at lunchtime on Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> March, Mark joined Bassema, Riziq and Taysir to give out samples of pitta bread dipped in olive oil and za'atar, the classic Palestinian mix of thyme and other herbs, along with honey-coated and smoked almonds. They described the difficult conditions in which these delicacies are produced, and told how Fairtrade helps by guaranteeing them an export market and a fair price.

On the Wednesday evening Bassema, Riziq and Taysir spoke to a packed audience in St Peter's Parish Church Hall, at a meeting organised by the East Kent Justice for Palestinians Group. They recounted their experience of having their lands seized and their trees destroyed by settlers from the illegal Israeli settlements on their land, and the constant humiliation and harassment at checkpoints manned by the Israeli army.

Bassema said: "We plant olive trees for our future and for our children as well. We love the olive tree as part of the family." Taysir added: "Olive trees are an integral part of our heritage. Some olive farmers even give their trees individual names to express how precious they are. Fairtrade gives us the security that helps us to go on farming our land."

**PHOTO:** Mark Thomas (third from left) with Palestinian olive farmers and Fairtrade supporters in Gulbenkian Café-Bar